

TEACHER MENTORS: LIVED EXPERIENCES MENTORING AT-RISK MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS

By

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DEDICATION

To my parents, thank you for instilling in me a love for learning and making the sacrifices to provide me with opportunities you didn't have.

To my children, Greg, Jenny, Kalli, and Tim, thank you for the consistent love, support, and encouragement while I was on this journey and for believing in me even when I wasn't sure I believed in myself.

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ABSTRACT

Problem: Because the experiences of students in the middle grades are “critical to his or her life’s chances” (Balfanz, 2009, p. 11) and ultimately to graduation (Balfanz, 2009) schools and communities are implementing mentoring interventions to support students struggling to be successful in school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Reimer & Smink, 2005; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). According to Dubois and Karcher (2014), current research centers on mentors who are volunteers working in school-based mentoring programs. There is little known about the role of teachers as mentors for students in school-based mentoring programs (Aylon, 2011; Dubois & Karcher, 2014). Although mentoring is growing as an intervention, there is a dearth in the literature regarding teachers’ experiences serving as mentors.

Procedures: This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the experiences of five middle school teachers who served at least one school year as a mentor in a structured school-based Check & Connect[®] mentoring program (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). With more schools using teachers as mentors, the impetus for this study evolved from a desire to know more about the primary research question: What are the lived experiences of teachers mentoring at-risk middle school students? Teacher mentors from one Midwest middle school were selected based on a criterion and convenience sample (Creswell, 2007). Participants included one man and four women. Two of the subjects were early career teachers and three had five or more years of teaching. Their experience mentoring ranged from two students to over 25. Digital recordings and field notes captured the reflections of the teacher mentors. Interviews were transcribed and a constant comparative analysis (Straus & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify emergent themes (Creswell, 2007).

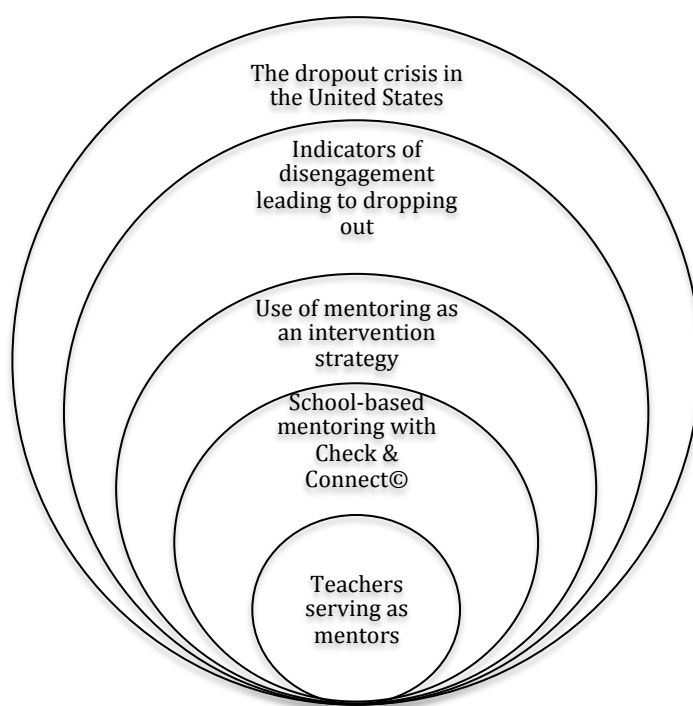
Findings: Describing the experiences of the teacher mentors, 11 themes were identified: relationships are foundational in the mentoring process; finding time to meet with the mentee is challenging but essential, mentoring requires doing more than the minimum, student progress provides motivation for the mentor, mentors find mentoring personally rewarding and enlightening, learning from mentoring at-risk students transfers into the mentor teacher’s classroom, mentoring is hard work, mentoring challenges collegial relationships, on-going relationships with parents require strategy and follow through, monitoring mentee’s data is a framework for the mentoring process, mentors appreciate training and on-going support. The integration of culturally responsive teaching strategies with the mentoring program not only positively impacted the experience of the mentors but also appeared to carry over into the teacher mentors’ classrooms. Teacher mentors exhibited dispositions that align with servant leaders (Nichols, 2011).

Conclusions: Strong relationships are formed when teachers mentor at-risk students that impact the teachers as well as the students. More research is needed to identify best practices for engaging teachers as mentors for at-risk students. Future investigations should also address the potential for the transfer of greater understanding of at-risk students and culturally responsive strategies to the classrooms of teachers who have participated as a mentor.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In describing the context for this study of the experiences of teacher mentors, this chapter serves to provide a framework, as shown in Figure 1.1, to support how the role of a teacher mentor is inter-related to multiple components working together to meet the need for increased numbers of students graduating from high school in the United States.

Figure 1.1. Explanation of Framework for this Study



The Dropout Crisis in the United States

In 2008, Dennis Van Roekel, the President of the National Education Association said, “Let us be absolutely clear about the dropout problem. Year in and year out, it takes a terrible toll on our young people, especially in poor and minority communities. For America, the costs of doing nothing about dropouts are enormous and far outweigh the costs of action” (Dianda, 2008, p. iii). In the United States, about one in five students does not graduate from

high school with his/her peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The impact is felt at local, state, and national levels through the loss of productive citizens and higher costs attributed to increased unemployment, health care, incarceration, and social services (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

Student engagement is identified as critical to school success and completion (Stout & Christensen, 2009). Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) define disengagement as a “higher order factor composed of correlated subfactors measuring different aspects of the process of detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement at school, and withdrawing from a commitment to school and to school completion” (p. 224). The disengagement that contributes to students struggling to be successful in school begins long before students reach high school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). In fact, middle school students who are not succeeding academically are on track to join the dropout statistics (Slack, Johnson, Dodor, & Woods, 2013).

To address the needs of middle school students demonstrating signs of disengagement that puts them at-risk of not successfully completing their kindergarten through twelfth grade education, schools and communities are working together to implement initiatives and interventions during this critical time in the students’ lives (Balfanz, 2009). In schools with predominantly minority and low socio-economic students, raising student achievement requires a comprehensive and intensive focus through a variety of efforts (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Mentoring, as one type of intervention in reform efforts, is showing promise for increasing the engagement of at-risk students (Balfanz et al., 2007; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Reimer & Smink, 2005).

Indicators of Disengagement Leading to Dropping Out

Dropping out of school doesn't happen suddenly (Balfanz, 2009; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). Researchers have identified key indicators for students in school that reliably and accurately identify youth who are disengaged, most at risk of academic failure, and a high potential for dropping out (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Attendance in school becomes an important indicator of school success as early as elementary school (Chang & Romero, 2008). The National High School Center (Therriault, O'Cummings, Heppen, Yerhot, & Scala, 2013) identifies the three primary indicators for identifying disengaging students: attendance, course performance, and behavior.

Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of almost 13,000 students in urban middle schools that demonstrated that poor attendance, behavior incidents, and failures in coursework in sixth grade were predictive of 60% of students who will not graduate from high school. These researchers concluded that “by combining effective whole-school reforms with attendance, behavioral, and extra-help interventions, graduation rates can be substantially increased” (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007, p. 223). Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) emphasize that reform efforts, especially at the middle school level, need to pay more attention to the “magnitude of student disengagement in high-poverty middle-grades schools, its impact on student achievement, and ultimately the role it plays in driving the nation's graduation rate crisis” (p. 223). In their plan for working with middle school students who need support to stay on the path to graduation, Balfanz, Herzog and Mac Iver (2007) suggest the assigning of a mentor as one type of intervention (p. 233).

One intervention that uses a mentor is the evidence-based mentoring program for schools called Check & Connect[®] (CC) (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). CC is an intervention focused on student engagement. In this intervention, the traditional indicators that focus on academics and behavior are paired with an additional focus on the “students’ emotional and intellectual feelings about school” (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 6) as essential to increasing their engagement and success in school. The authors define four subtypes of engagement as multidimensional including not only observable indicators within: (1) academic and (2) behavioral engagement, but also adding an emphasis on the less observable indicators of: (3) cognitive, and (4) affective engagement (Christensen et al., 2012).

Christensen, Stout, and Pohl further describe the emphasis on these additional indicators,

Student engagement includes both socializing the learner and fostering an academic identity. It is represented by the student’s perceptions of competence and control (I can), personal values and goals (I want to), and social connectedness to peers and teachers (I belong). These aspects of engagement are embedded in the cognitive and affective subtypes of engagement. (p. 7)

These four sub-types of engagement are used as both indicators to identify students who are disengaged and facilitators to assist in structuring intervention designs (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012, p. 7). They are central to the Check & Connect[®] (CC) mentoring model (Christensen et al., 2012) used by the school in this study.

Use of Mentoring as an Intervention Strategy

Students are more likely to remain and achieve in schools when they perceive there are people in the school who care about them (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Henderson, 2007). A structured mentoring program for students, referred based on disengagement

indicators of attendance, behavior, and grades, has been identified as a key characteristic of a research-based school improvement program (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Numerous benefits of using mentoring as an intervention for struggling students include promotion of self-identity and positive self-image, reduction of risky behaviors, facilitation of career development, as well as reducing school dropout rates and increasing academic achievement. (Christensen et al., 2012; Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Lampley & Johnson, 2010; Levinson, Darrow, Levinson, Klein, & McKee, 1978).

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center (2013), mentoring has also been identified as one of the basic core strategies for dropout prevention. The Center defined it as, “a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust” (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2013). Although school-based mentoring as an intervention is growing as a topic in literature, the focus has been placed more on outcomes for students and to a limited degree on the experiences of the students (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Karcher & Nakkula, 2009). Examining existing literature, little exists that focuses on the experiences of the mentors (Aylon, 2011; Karcher, 2008).

Karcher and Nakkula (2010) emphasize that the effectiveness of mentoring programs with youth is dependent on the quality of the relationship. With school-based mentoring as an intervention for students at-risk of dropping out or not completing school growing as an intervention used in schools (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2006), the typical resource to provide mentors comes from community volunteers. Herrera and Karcher (2014) discuss the potential of the volunteer mentors working with students in school-based

mentoring programs to influence the perceptions of the teachers about these students. In their review of school-based mentoring, Herrera and Karcher (2014) summarize, “that adults at school can be among youth’s primary adult support figures and that these relationships appear to benefit youth” (p. 207). The only example in Herrera and Karcher’s (2014) work that describes teachers as mentors appears in the context of a “natural mentor” (p. 207).

A mentor is considered a natural mentor when there is an unstructured but important relationship with a young person (Rhodes, 2005). Natural mentors, those adults that many former students will later say made a significant difference in their lives, may include teachers, youth leaders, coaches, or family members. Many teachers will informally assist a student, or the student will enjoy hanging out in the teacher’s classroom before or after school, and the relationship has meaning to the student. These relationships, because they are not part of a formal referral or matching procedure, are considered natural mentoring relationships (Rhodes, 2005). In a review of research by Herrera and Karcher (2014), the researchers found several studies that showed “having natural mentors in schools is associated with an increased likelihood of graduation and postsecondary education” (p. 207).

At a time when more pressure is on schools to be accountable for students succeeding, it is also a time of diminishing resources for nonacademic programs (Randolph & Johnson, 2008). As DuBois and Karcher (2014) summarize, “The one thing we can be sure about the future is that there will likely never come a day when there are enough programmatic mentors to meet the needs of all youth who could benefit from a mentor” (p. 530). Schools may look for more structured resources for volunteers to help increase available volunteers to be mentors. Programs such as Americorps’ Promise Fellows (Americorps Promise Fellows, 2014) provide full-time volunteers in schools and community organizations

specifically trained to mentor students who are at high risk of dropping out or not graduating successfully. As described,

Promise Fellows increase the capacity of the schools and community-based organizations by connecting youth to caring adults, service-learning, and high quality academic supports. Using an array of research-based approaches, they track attendance, monitor behaviors, and support academic growth. Promise Fellows also provide a powerful and cost-effective solution for school districts and community-based organizations striving to meet the needs of youth, grades 6-10. (AmeriCorps Promise Fellows, 2014)

These Promise Fellows are specifically placed in programs to address the achievement gap and are required to monitor data on a national data system. For their year of service, they are provided a small monthly stipend, insurance, and loan deferment during their service followed by an education award at the end of their service that can be used to pay off loans or for tuition for additional post-secondary work (AmeriCorps Promise Fellows, 2014). The concern with using AmeriCorps volunteers in mentoring positions is that their term of service is only one year. Mentoring research has found that sustained consistency of the caring adult, the mentor, is more beneficial and that shorter term mentoring may actually cause more harm than benefit (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

Converse and Lignuagari/Kraft (2009) assert that “using the school as the training site and school personnel as mentors” (p. 44) could ultimately be a cost-effective intervention. Researchers who developed mentoring programs that encourage the employment of full-time staff to serve as mentors are also suggesting the practical consideration of staffing the mentor positions with existing school personnel (Christensen,

Stout, & Pohl, 2012). As schools turn to their existing staff, including teachers, to provide the additional interventions needed for struggling students, little is known about the experiences of serving as a mentor for a struggling student while also serving as a teacher in the building (Aylon, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) of teacher mentors working with at-risk middle school students and to identify the essence (Moustakas, 1994) of that experience. This study focused on the experiences of five teacher mentors who had, for a minimum of one school year, mentored at least one at-risk middle school student as part of a comprehensive school-based mentoring program in their building. The intent was to discover their experience: what it felt like, what they did, and how it impacted them from their point of view.

The impetus for the topic came from my own experiences as the national coordinator of outreach and primary trainer for the University of Minnesota's Check & Connect® (CC) student engagement intervention (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) and my current position managing CC for a local school district. In the University position I worked with the researchers to design, market, and implement consulting and training on the evidence-based CC intervention for schools and youth-serving organizations across the United States. During my time at the University, multi-tiered structures and training opportunities were created to encourage, promote, and support implementation of CC through various venues including: state departments of education, regional education cooperatives, district level initiatives, and single school buildings as well as through community and youth organization collaborations. The research and implementation structure of CC (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) uses a

school-based mentoring model with a full- or part-time person hired as a mentor. However, hiring additional staff as mentors was not realistic for the majority of the schools and organizations with whom I consulted and/or trained. The primary modification to the CC model used existing staff, primarily teachers, as mentors. However, the University does not yet have any research or resources specifically addressing the use of teachers as mentors (Christensen, et al., 2012).

Hired for my current position as Manager of Youth Engagement for a local school district to implement CC, the program was implemented in all three of the middle schools, two traditional high schools, and the alternative high school in the fall of 2012. I currently manage the program with five building coordinators, six Promise Fellow Americorps volunteers, and over 70 existing staff mentors, most of whom are teachers. In the 2012-13 school year CC mentoring services are provided to approximately 250 middle and high school students who have been identified as disengaged from school and at-risk of not graduating.

It was from this background and current interest in knowing more about the unique experiences of a teacher mentor, the topic of this study evolved. This study will inform my work and may inform other schools considering and/or using teachers as mentors. It was not the intent of this study to evaluate the impact of these teacher mentors on outcomes for students or to compare the outcomes of using teachers mentors with school-based mentoring programs using either full-time staff or volunteers as mentors.

Research Questions

The central question for my study was, “What are the lived experiences of teachers mentoring at-risk middle school students?” As suggested by Creswell (2007), this question

was “open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” (p. 107). Sub-questions designed to elicit responses to answer the central question (Creswell, 2007) were grouped into categories and outlined in an interview protocol (see Appendix D). The sub-question categories and questions were:

1. Describe what you do as a mentor for your student(s).
2. Mentoring Experiences
 - Tell me about a time when something went particularly well with your mentee.
 - Tell me about a specific time when you were challenged in mentoring your student.
 - Describe how being a mentor changed your perceptions about struggling students.
 - Describe how being a mentor has impacted your classroom.
3. Connecting with Parents

Explain how you connect with the parents of your mentee.
4. Collegial Support
 - Tell me about the type of training and on-going support you’ve received, or would have liked to receive, from administrators and program Coordinators
 - Explain how being a mentor has impacted your relationships with your colleagues.
5. Summary

Describe what advice you would provide to a teacher who has just agreed to be a mentor.

Significance of the Study

The United States continues to grapple with the need for educational excellence and a focus on achievement (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Horning Fox, 2013; Slack, Johnson, Dodor, & Woods, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The need to address the education and achievement of all students remains at the forefront of dialogue and initiatives such as GradNation with a goal of 90% of United States students graduating from high school by 2020 (*Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic*, n.d.). It is widely accepted that students need to graduate from high school as a vital first-step toward a successful future as an adult. While much emphasis is placed on high school graduation, engagement in school at the middle school level is a critical factor in retaining a student within the education system (Balfanz, Bridgeland, & Bruce, 2013). It is increasingly understood that student disengagement usually begins long before a student reaches high school age (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Balfanz, 2009). Thus, it is important to provide interventions for students that need help to persevere through high school graduation.

Mentoring has been identified as one tool that has proven to be successful in keeping students in school (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). School-based mentoring is one of the most prevailing types of mentoring currently used (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan 2000). Schools turning to mentoring as an intervention must also address the ability to provide consistent and well-prepared mentors to serve their students (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). The challenge is to find adults to mentor the growing numbers of students who are

struggling (DuBois & Karcher, 2014). In most school-based mentoring programs, community volunteers are trained and come to the school weekly to meet one-on-one with their assigned mentee. In an environment of increased need and declining resources, schools must work to find the most qualified adults to help the students most at-risk, leading many to turn to the existing adults in the building: teachers (Aylon, 2011; Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2008). While calling on teachers seems to make practical sense, some schools are choosing to modify evidence-based programs to include teachers as mentors, even on the suggestion of the researchers themselves (Christiansen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012).

Only a few studies in the literature include school personnel as mentors (Aylon, 2011; Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2008; Slicker & Palmer, 1993). There is a scarcity in the literature addressing the experiences and impact of mentoring when using teachers as mentors. Knowledge about the experiences and subsequent impact on teachers serving as mentors is relatively unknown (Aylon, 2011). Because the most credible and believable experiences come from those who have actually lived the experience, this study focused on the perceptions and viewpoints directly from the teacher mentors. It focused not on the outcomes for the students, but on how the stories and reflections from the teacher mentors describe how being a mentor impacted them both personally and in the classroom. This study attempted to begin to fill the gap in the research (Creswell, 2007) about using teachers as mentors by providing one look at the common experiences of five teachers serving as mentors for at-risk middle school students.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation includes five chapters: Introduction, Review of Literature, Methodology, Results, and Conclusion. Chapter one provides an introduction to the purpose

of the study--including the research questions and significance of the study--a description of the overall dropout prevention focus in the United States, and the use of school-based mentoring as context for why the middle school in this study implemented a mentoring model to help meet the needs of their struggling students. Chapter two reviews the literature used to establish the research, questions, methodology, and assumptions as well as to provide greater context on elements that arose from the experiences of the teacher mentors. Chapter two also includes additional information about the role of a mentor with at-risk students, an overview of Check & Connect[®] the specific school-based mentoring program used in the building where participants in the study teach, cultural responsive teaching, and teachers as servant leaders as well as the gaps that exist in the literature. Chapter three explains the methods used in the investigation, including the philosophical assumptions that guided the research design, specifics on the design and process, and how the analysis of the data was done. Chapter four provides the findings from the research with rich descriptions (Creswell, 2007) shared directly from the voices of the teacher mentors. Chapter five discusses the implications of the results, addresses conclusions, and shares recommendations for further research. This is followed by the list of references used to conduct this study. In the Appendices, this author includes documents used in the study: the email sent to invite study participants (Appendix A), an invitational flyer used to invite study participants (Appendix B), a Qualtrics survey (Appendix C), the interview protocol (Appendix D), and the informed consent document (Appendix E).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the process of a phenomenological study (Van Manen, 1990), an examination of the literature is completed throughout the study as themes emerge and enhance the process of analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As suggested by Creswell (2007), various aspects of the phenomenon were explored and divided into topics. In a qualitative study, as topics emerge that had not previously been addressed, such topics are added to the literature review (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As described by Galvan (2006), a literature review allows the researcher to identify various available research that apply to the focus of the study and to look for consistencies and gaps that illustrate specific topics within the researcher's current study.

The literature review is presented through the following topic areas: (1) mentoring, including the definition of mentoring, types of mentoring used with students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grades, the use of school-based mentoring as an intervention for at-risk students struggling to be successful in school, and mentoring from the perspective of the mentor; (2) a brief explanation of the Check & Connect[®] student engagement intervention being used at the middle school included in this study; (3) culturally responsive teaching; (4) teachers as servant leaders; and (5) current research on teachers as mentors.

Mentoring

In the context of this study, mentoring is defined as a process that involves a caring and supportive adult in a non-parental relationship with a youth (Rhodes, Spence, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). In a more formal definition, Rhodes (2002) defines mentoring as, "a

relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger protégé—a relationship in which the adult provides on-going guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé" (p. 3). Mentoring may take place informally or through a formalized process and structured program (Randolph & Johnson, 2008). This study focused on teacher mentors involved in a formal school-based mentoring program.

For children and youth, there are primarily two venues for mentoring discussed in the literature: community-based and school-based (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). The fundamental difference is based on where the mentoring actually takes place with the student. With community-based mentoring, the mentor and student meet outside the school day and outside the school building (Rogers, 2001). For school-based mentoring, the mentor comes into the school building, usually during the school day, and meets with the youth he or she is mentoring (Randolph & Johnson, 2008).

The other distinction made in youth-based mentoring programs is the identification of two types of relationship style: developmental and instrumental (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). In an analysis by Karcher and Nakkula (2010) of how the terms developmental and instrumental were discussed in the literature, they determined that the terms share three elements:

Each relationship style (1) includes both relational and goal-directed activities, (2) places an emphasis on whether relational or goal-directed interactions are considered primary and predominate the early period in the relationship, and (3) underscores that these relationships are youth centered or collaborative in that the youth's voice,

interests, and opinion are always respected, encouraged, and supported in making decisions regarding activities. (p. 16)

The main differences between the two styles relate to the “pattern of interaction, focus, purpose, and authorship over time” (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010, p. 18). In the developmental style, the initial effort of the mentor goes into creating a strong relationship with the student evolving over time to also include goal setting (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). With an instrumental style, the process of mentoring focuses on a specific purpose, such as increased engagement in school (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) that the mentor and mentee have both agreed to work toward (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). This distinction is important as this study was focused on teachers as mentors in an instrumental, school-based mentoring program. The instrumental relationship in this study was focused on increasing student engagement (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) for at-risk children of color in the selected middle school site.

The growth of school-based mentoring over the last decade has been significant (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, McMaken, & Jucovy, 2007). In 2002, Rhodes estimated that about 70 percent of formal mentoring programs in the United States were school-based programs. In 2005, it was estimated that 870,000 adults were mentoring children in school settings (MENTOR, 2006). Randolph and Johnson (2008) summarized possible reasons for this increase: improved accountability for schools regarding student achievement, increased school-based mentoring programs, and, within the school, improved access for students to mentoring programs.

At the foundation of the school-based mentoring movement is the concern for students who are showing signs of disengagement from school including reduced attendance,

academic struggles, and behavior issues (Herrara, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011). For many of these young people, there often is a lack of capacity in their home life to assist and support them in navigating the needs of school. Their parents and family may truly care about helping their children but, for numerous reasons, do not have the time or skills to help their children be successful in school. For these students, there is a need for assistance from other adults. Herrara, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011, in their study of mentoring through Big Brothers Big Sisters, document this emphasis, “Mentoring programs aim to provide a key protective factor—a caring adult—to youth to help ensure that they can negotiate some of these developmental challenges” (p. 347).

School-based mentoring involves linking adults with students in a one-to-one relationship with a caring adult. In the majority of the research, the mentors are volunteers that come into a school during the school day to meet with their mentee for about an hour a week either during the school day or immediately after school (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Karcher, 2008; Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Research on school-based mentoring programs underscore the importance of relationships with adult mentors especially for at-risk youth (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrara, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Karcher, 2008; Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Rhodes & Dubois, 2006).

Research on school-based mentoring (Herrara, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Karcher, 2008; Randolph & Johnson, 2008) demonstrates that these programs are capable of: improving academic performance, increasing attendance, decreasing behavior referrals, increasing the completion and submission of homework and assignments, reducing truancy, and lowering the incidents of tardiness. Herrara and her colleagues (2011) suggest that

because school-based mentoring takes place within the school environment, it may “have even stronger effects on youth’s relationships with their teachers” (p. 347); however, this research focuses on volunteers, not teachers, as the mentors.

Research has been done to determine what characteristics define a successful mentor (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Leyton-Armakan et al., 2012; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006) and on what youth think and feel about being in a mentoring relationship, and the importance of mentees’ perceptions on the quality of the relationships and types of support they received from their mentors (Eby et al., 2013). Keller and Price (2012) studied the styles of the relationship between mentor and mentee finding a sage/counseling style may produce the most positive relationship. However, in all these studies, the data came from the students and not from the mentors themselves.

In a Martin and Siferts (2012) study on mentor satisfaction from community-based mentor programs, mentors identified a perceived mutual benefit to having the relationship with the student and perceived barriers and challenges including such things as hesitance about how to begin the relationship with a student, conflicts with scheduling, challenges with communication, and working with the parents of their mentee. In a study from Scotland researchers Philip and Handry (2000) interviewed 30 adult mentors in a school-based mentoring program resulting in those mentors perceiving the primary benefits of mentoring as “(1) putting them in touch with the realities of young people’s experiences within a community/neighborhood; (2) offering the potential to redefine adult/young person relationships, and (3) providing acceptable support and challenge, meeting young people as equals” (p. 10). However, there is a absence in the literature about the actual experiences of

being a mentor from the voices of the mentors themselves and literature about teachers as mentors is extremely limited (Aylon, 2011).

Check & Connect[®]: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention

In selecting a site for this study, the desire was to identify a middle school utilizing an evidence-based mentoring program. Because of this author's background and experience in the Check & Connect[®] (CC) mentoring intervention, she wanted to study this phenomenon in a building that had been using CC for several years. CC is an evidence-based student engagement intervention designed to increase student engagement at school and with learning (Christensen, Stout, and Pohl, 2012) by placing the student with a caring adult mentor (Christensen et al., 2012). CC was developed and researched by the University of Minnesota beginning in 1990 and has undergone numerous studies to validate the program's effects on improving school completion (Christensen et al, 2012; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). It is used in schools and youth organizations throughout the United States and several foreign countries (Check & Connect: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention, 2013).

In 2006, CC met the standards to be included in the What Works Clearinghouse (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) as an evidence-based intervention. The What Works Clearinghouse conducts extensive reviews on research and states that, "dropout prevention interventions include services and activities such as incentives, counseling, monitoring, school restructuring, curriculum design, literary support, or community-based services designed to mitigate factors impeding progress in school" (What Works Clearinghouse, 2013). The What Works Clearinghouse is a vetted resource for schools to identify evidence-based approaches or programs. "Of the dropout prevention interventions reviewed by the U.

S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, Check & Connect is the only program found to have strong evidence of positive effects on staying in school" (Check & Connect: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention, 2013).

In CC, four main theoretical perspectives informed the design, including "resilience, systems theory, cognitive-behavioral theory, and intrinsic motivation" (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012, p. 5). CC as an intervention is designed with an instrumental style of mentoring (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). While the relationship between the mentor and mentee is still the primary vehicle, the goal of the relationship between the mentor and the student is to increase the engagement of the student in school and with learning (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). The mentor "both advocates for and challenges the student and partners with the family, school, and community to keep education salient for the student" (Check & Connect: A Comprehensive Student Engagement Intervention, 2013).

The mentor's responsibilities in addition to building the relationship include: (1) a "check" component where the mentor conducts systematic monitoring of observable indicators of engagement such as: attendance, behavior, grades; (2) a "connect" component where the mentor identifies non-observable indicators of cognitive and affective engagement and implements appropriate personalized interventions that address areas of disengagement for the student; and (3) a parent component where the mentor involves and communicates with the student's parents or family in strengths-based problem-solving (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). Within the evidence-based model, mentors are full or part-time, non-teaching staff who manage a caseload of students and maintain the mentoring relationship for a minimum of two years with each student (Christensen et al., 2012).

Implementing sites use their building or district data to identify the specific criteria for the referral of students for the CC intervention. These criteria are usually selected from observable indicators for disengagement including: attendance, behavior and grades (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). CC is focused on “student engagement at school and with learning” (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 6). This focus on engagement is “conceptualized as four subtypes: academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement” (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 6). The mentor uses indicators within these subtypes to identify areas of risk for the student and as a guide to determine potential interventions (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 105). Christensen and colleagues (2012) expand the typical focus on academics and behavior to also include a focus on the student’s cognitive engagement which “is expressed in self-regulated learning strategies, goal setting, interest in learning, motivation-to-learn, and student perception of the relevance of school to personal aspirations, the value of learning, and control of and competence in schoolwork” (p. 7) as well as affective engagement which “refers to a sense of belonging and connection to school and availability of quality support from parents, teachers, and peers” (p. 7).

The process of using CC in a school is systematized through specific implementation steps sequencing through preparation, implementation, evaluation, and sustaining (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012, p. 21). The implementation process includes oversight from a building coordinator who assists with referrals, training and support of mentors, coordinating data, connecting mentors with resources in the school and community, and monitoring fidelity of implementation (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 78). While resources for CC mention the possible use of existing staff as mentors (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012, p.11), there is no specific information on the unique role of a teacher as a mentor or any

research that has been done by the University of Minnesota including existing teachers in a building as mentors.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

While interviewing the participants for this study, it was revealed that the middle school selected for the study had combined its building efforts for meeting the needs of culturally diverse students with its mentoring program. One of the important characteristics associated with quality mentoring relationships (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006) is the mentor's capacity to establish the relationship honoring the life situation of the student, including his/her culture. In finding this combining of interventions, the literature on culturally responsive teaching was added to this review.

With over 25% of the children in the United States identified as at-risk, schools cannot continue to use traditional instructional strategies that are not meeting the current needs of students in the classroom (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013). Schools must use indicators such as attendance, behavior, and grades that help find students who are struggling before they have completely disengaged (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). Many of these students are the ones who "still come to school, come to class, rarely participate in extracurricular activities and gradually fall through the cracks because they don't have discipline problems" (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013, chap. 2, para. 4). For many at-risk students, there are obstacles such as hunger, poverty, homelessness, high mobility, and other factors over which they have no control. These conditions, especially for students in schools with high poverty, "can experience a range of pull-and-push factors that may promote disengagement from schooling" (Balfanz et al., 2007, p. 225). In order to

address student needs, schools must address the needs of their faculty and staff to understand the cultural factors that may serve as barriers for their students.

Edwards and Edick (2012) note, “As the student population becomes increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic level, teachers are challenged to meet the academic, cultural and community needs of tomorrow’s citizen” (p. 1). Culture influences individual beliefs, thinking, and actions (Gay 2010). Gay (2010) notes that for teachers and students, their own culture impacts how they teach and learn. The changes in classroom demographics necessitate teachers learning how to “recognize, honor, and incorporate the personal abilities of students into their teaching strategies” (Gay, 2010, p. 1) to meet the needs of the children in their schools.

One focus area of work and research delineated in the literature identifies this as culturally responsive teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies culturally responsive teaching as recognizing that the home and community culture of a student also has a direct relationship with the culture within a school and that the two impact the ability of the student to be successful. Gay (2010) defines it as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). The intent of culturally responsive teaching is to create an environment for the student where he/she feels accepted and where academic success is an accessible goal for all students and nonnegotiable in the expectations for teachers (Gay, 2010).

For a variety of reasons, students may come to a building lacking even the basic academic skills that increases their risk of failure (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013). If they are passed along without anyone either realizing they are struggling or not addressing it, the

student falls further behind and is increasingly vulnerable to failure and/or dropping out (Brough et al., 2013). With training and implementing of strategies aligned with culturally responsive teaching, students are provided with teachers who empower them to be more successful academically as well as developing their confidence, willingness to take risks, and perseverance (Gay, 2010). Teachers, using strategies, techniques, and attitudes embedded in the philosophy of culturally responsive teaching, accept responsibility for fostering a confidence within their students to believe in their abilities while nurturing, encouraging, and dedicating themselves to helping them succeed (Gay, 2010).

Teachers as Servant Leaders

While conducting interviews with the study participants, literature was reviewed to explain a common disposition consistent in the shared phenomenon of the teacher mentors. The concept of teachers as servant leaders (Nichols, 2011) seemed to describe the disposition demonstrated through the stories and reflections by the teacher mentors in this study. Within the field of mentoring, there are descriptions of ideal characteristics of mentors that include such things as patience, persistence, flexibility, belief that all students can succeed, and skills in advocacy, collaboration, organization, as well as the desire to be a mentor (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006). In interviewing the teacher mentors in this study, there was something that appeared deeper than just these characteristics. In searching the literature, the topic of teachers as servant leaders (Nichols, 2011) seemed to explain this disposition apparent in all five of the study participants:

The term “servant leader” originally was coined by Greenleaf (1970) described as, A servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests

itself in the care taken by the servant- first, to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: do those served grow as person; do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what of the least privileged in society: will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? (p. 7)

In 1991, Greenleaf clarified the elements of servant leadership to include listening, empathy, healing (of self and others), awareness (of others, situations, and self), persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of others, and building community (pp. 9-20). An eleventh characteristic, "calling" was added by Barbuto and Wheeler from the University of Nebraska (as cited in Sipe & Frick, 2009), interpreted by Crippen (2010) as people who will "sacrifice their own self-interests for the sake of others" (p. 33). The term "servant leader" has been used extensively in business and management books (Autry, 2001; Cashman, 1999; Collins, 2001; Covey, 1994).

While there is negligible research on servant leadership with regard to the role of a teacher, the topic of servant leadership in education is not new. Greenleaf, in his book *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness* (2002), focused an entire chapter on the topic, albeit centered on what is now identified as post-secondary education. In identifying his concerns with the educational system and thus the need for servant leadership, Greenleaf (2002) identified three main points including (1) the lack of specific leadership training for individuals showing the potential for leadership; (2) the tradition in education systems to provide less access to educational opportunities for those who are poor that then denies them the chance to return to lead in their families and neighborhoods and/or on behalf of those who are disadvantaged; and (3) the unclear stance

that schools take on teaching values. While Greenleaf (2002) is known for coming from a religious premise, the expectation that schools have some obligation to provide a strong foundation of values for students and assisting them in making good choices is a standard expectation within education (Lickona, 1991).

Culver (2009) promotes that school administrators should frame their leadership role through the servant leader lens. The foundation of this call to servant leadership claims that for school administrators to successfully navigate needed trust and collaboration across many varied groups both within the school and across the community, they no longer can come from an authoritarian role (Culver, 2009). To be successful, administrators must “come to grips with our own capacities, nurture relationships with all members of our organization, and empower them to work as teams” (Culver, 2009, .. 1, para. 14). Greenleaf Center for Service-learning (2014) provides a further explanation of the role of a servant leader that can apply to a school administrator,

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible (What is Servant Leadership?).

Cerit (2010), in a study of 563 teachers in Turkish primary schools, found a significant and positive relationship between the commitment of teachers to school and principals’ leadership through servant leader behaviors. Although not a published document, McKenzie (2012), a recent doctoral candidate at the University of Phoenix, studied the

characteristic of servant leadership in school principals as a component of job satisfaction of teachers. In his sample of 115 high school teachers in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, he also found a positive correlation between teacher job satisfaction and their perception of the building leader as a servant leader (McKenzie, 2012). Culver (2013) represents her thoughts on teachers taking a servant leadership perspective in their classrooms: “Within the classroom specifically, leadership is essentially the art of helping students to define and achieve their goals and purposes, and also functions within a matrix that involves purposes, values, and faith.” (chap. 2, Contemporary Theories of Leadership, para. 11).

Furthermore, Culver (2013) contends that often servant leaders will lead from inside the group of people they wish to influence. This description seems to especially apply to teachers leading from within their classrooms with their students:

When we are servant leaders, we are not always out in front of the pack. Sometimes, we operate from inside the pack to allow others to lead in areas of expertise...our leadership is evident in the way we ensure success of both co-leaders and follower by identifying and removing obstacles (chap. 6, Scenario 52, para. 3).

With more emphasis on personalized learning in the schools, teachers are becoming less lecturers in the classroom and more facilitators who identify and motivate students through their interests, help students engage through a process of instruction that begins where the students are, and sequence them forward while encouraging them to continue to progress (American Institutes for Research, 2013). Bowman (2005) describes this role as, “The teacher as servant leader functions as a trailblazer for those served by removing obstacles that stand in their path” (Bowman, 2005, p. 256).

In his book, *Teachers as Servant Leaders*, Nichols (2011) is one of the few authors directly focused on applying the concept of servant leadership to teachers in the classroom. Nichols (2011) sees the focus of the teachers' service in their ability to assist students, parents, and others in the school and community. As teachers develop the climate in the classroom around the premise of a servant leader, students come to understand their intent is to help them learn, grow, and achieve. It changes the dynamic from a traditional focus of a teacher enforcing compliance to one where the teacher's primary role is to assist the student to fully engage in his or her own learning (Nichols, 2011). Crippen (2010) also applies the role of a teacher as a servant leader to the importance of the relationships with students; "Teaching is all about making connections with people. It is about relationships and investment in other and their future and ours" (p. 27). Taking the service leader description by Autry (2001) and applying it to a teacher in a classroom, the teacher then shifts the paradigm of student success from the quantity of work alone as a measure of his or her success, but rather measures success by the quality of the work the student has done (chap. 5, Myth Four, para. 14)

In a 2013 publication, *Applying Servant Leadership in Today's Schools*, Culver provides a more comprehensive look at the concept of servant leadership in kindergarten through 12th grade schools. Although the focus is on administrators as servant leaders, Culver (2013) believes that the role of a leader is to remove obstacles getting in the way of others reaching their potential and goals. This certainly could apply to teachers and their leadership role in the classroom.

In reviewing the literature on mentoring, culturally responsive teaching, and servant leadership, the three seem to converge around dispositions. Looking at the changes in the

students' needs in the current classrooms and teacher preparation, Edwards and Edick (2012) emphasize that beyond the traditional developing of skill and knowledge, the success of professional educators may now be contingent on their ability to develop and demonstrate these dispositions.

Teachers as Mentors

This study was designed to focus on the experiences of teachers who mentor at-risk middle school students in a school-based mentoring program. With the growth of school-based mentoring research (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010), there still exists little information on utilizing existing building teachers as the mentors with at-risk students (Aylon, 2011). Beyond that, there is very little in the literature about the experience of a teacher mentor from the teachers' own perspective.

Lampley and Johnson (2010) studied a school-based mentoring program where at-risk middle school students were provided mentors from a pool of various school building staff including teachers. In this study, 35 school staff met one-to-one with a student in the building identified as needing additional supports as based on the student data on attendance, behavior, and grades. They met an average of twice a week throughout the school year. As initially developed, the purpose was to, "establish relationships between identified at-risk students and caring adults" (Lampley & Johnson, 2010, p. 5). The mentors worked with their mentees on study skills, communication, problem solving, and positive behavior; and they provided encouragement for the student to be more successful in school (Lampley & Johnson, 2010). While the study found a positive gain for the students in attendance, behavior, and grades (Lampley & Johnson, 2010), the study did not include any information on the experiences from the perspective of the teachers who served as mentors.

In Aylon's (2011) study on the role of teacher mentors as leaders of advisory, or small groups of students

Students and teachers indicated that the mentoring...systems created a space where both could relax and release anxieties. Students knew they had somewhere and someone to go to even if they were not doing well in academic classes...mentoring became a focal point for creating a community in the classroom.(p. 188).

The teachers that served as mentors in Aylon's (2011) study expressed confidence in their abilities, and he found that the teachers "gained more control over the teaching process by interacting with their students both in academic and in mentoring classes" (p. 119). However, in Aylon's study (2011), the teachers were not mentoring students in a one-to-one ratio, but rather within a small group. Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007), speak to a similar role to mentoring describing, "Effective strategies in reaching an unresponsive student typically require assigning a specific adult, usually one of the student's main teachers, with the responsibility of shepherding the student" (p. 232).

In a study by Converse and Lignuagaris/Kraft (2009) that investigated the impact of school-based mentoring on at-risk students between 13-15 years of age, teachers as well as other school staff were used as mentors for the 18-week study. While the study was more focused on student outcomes from mentoring, the authors did address the experiences of school staff mentors (Converse & Lignuagaris/Kraft, 2009). The mentoring program conducted at a middle school provided a stipend to existing school staff to serve as mentors. School counselors used discipline referrals and unexcused absences as the basis for selection of students to be served by the mentoring program (Converse & Lignuagaris/Kraft, 2009). Faculty and staff were invited to an overview session regarding what was needed from

mentors and they were encouraged to volunteer to participate. Mentors then selected mentees off a list of students who met the criteria. In this study, the mentors were not allowed to select a student in their current classes. Compensation was provided to the mentors for meeting with their mentee regularly and completing the required reports (Converse & Lignuagaris/Kraft, 2009). Mentors also were offered training over two half-days that included specific information about meeting with students and reporting, but also legal issues and cultural competency (Converse & Lignuagaris/Kraft, 2009).

The Converse and Lignuagaris/Kraft (2009) study is of particular interest because the researchers asked mentors about their experiences through weekly logs and semi-structured interviews. The data from the mentors' weekly logs were analyzed and comment themes were identified that included statements made to change something, saw a positive change, saw a negative change, laughed, student was open, student was not open (Converse & Lignuagaris/Kraft, 2009, p. 41). From the interviews, Converse and Lignuagaris/Kraft (2009) determined that the relationships with students viewed as more positive by the mentors were ones including activities such as sharing food, playing games, and the mentor listening. Additional analysis suggested that some mentors had more positive experiences than others and that those who did report their experiences as more positive were mentors who met more consistently with their mentees (Converse & Lignuagaris/Kraft, 2009).

White-Hood (1993) started a mentoring program in her middle school first using teachers as mentors and ultimately expanding it to include not only school personnel but also community members as well. With the initial 20 teachers that chose to mentor, they were paired with students not in their classes; and each chose one or two students to mentor. Learning from the implementation, White-Hood (1993) notes that, "We found successful

mentoring required staff development, feedback and on-going training” (p. 76). In addition, they identified 10 stages in the mentoring process: attraction, cliché exchanges, recounting, personal disclosure, bonding, fear of infringement, revisiting framework, peak mentoring, reciprocity, and closure (White-Hood, 1993, p. 76). White-Hood (1993) found that teachers who were mentors reported feeling needed and valued.

In a study by Slicker and Palmer (1993), teachers, as well as other existing school personnel, served as mentors for at-risk high school students. The mentors were matched by counselors and were not allowed to mentor a student they had in class (Slicker & Palmer, 1993). A one-hour training was provided along with some handouts providing appropriate mentoring activities class (Slicker & Palmer, 1993). These mentors were asked to log how often they met with their mentee, what type of meeting they had, and how long they met class (Slicker & Palmer, 1993). The mentoring program lasted for six months and Slicker and Palmer (1993) reported that, “The major overriding aspects of the experimental condition (mentoring) were maintenance of confidentiality to build trust, encouragement to build academic progress, and special attention to build improved feelings of self-worth” (p. 329). The students in the experimental group who had effective mentoring, as determined through analysis of data, had a 100% return rate to school in the fall (Slicker & Palmer, 1993). Although this study used teachers as mentors, the authors did not include any information on their specific experiences. While the noted studies (Aylon, 2011; Converse & Liguagaris/Krafts, 2009; Lampley & Johnson, 2010; Slicker & Palmer, 1993; White-Hood, 1993) did use teachers, along with other school personnel as mentors, there is relatively little information in the literature about the experiences of teacher mentors or how those experiences impacted them.

Summary

The literature reviewed demonstrates the critical need in the United States for programs that address the high numbers of students who are dropping out of school or not successfully graduating. Research is documenting that mentoring is a growing intervention used in school-based settings for students at-risk of dropping out or not reaching graduation and is showing promise in helping these students be more successful in school (Dubois & Karcher, 2014). The CC program is an evidence-based intervention model that has demonstrated success in keeping students in school (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). This comprehensive intervention is designed in a school-based mentoring model that includes monitoring student data, linking students to appropriate interventions, and engaging parents and family members (Christensen et al., 2012).

A few studies (Aylon, 2011; Converse & Liguagari/Krafts, 2009; Lampley & Johnson, 2010; Slicker & Palmer, 1993; White-Hood, 1993) have investigated the role of teachers as mentors for at-risk students. However, the applicability to teachers serving as one-to-one mentors within school-based settings is limited. The dispositions of those who are serving as teacher mentors may be explained or impacted by some degree of culturally responsive teaching training (Gay, 2010) or in the context of teachers as servant leaders (Nichols, 2011).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study focused on the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) of five teachers serving as one-to-one mentors of middle school students considered at high risk of dropping out or not graduating from high school. Qualitative methods were selected to allow for the respondents to share their own experiences in their own words and to provide an understanding of their experiences as well as what the teacher mentors thought and felt about those experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a researcher, I listened intently to the thoughts, feelings, stories, and perceived challenges and rewards of the teacher mentors; and I paid close attention to their facial expressions, body language, and tone as they shared.

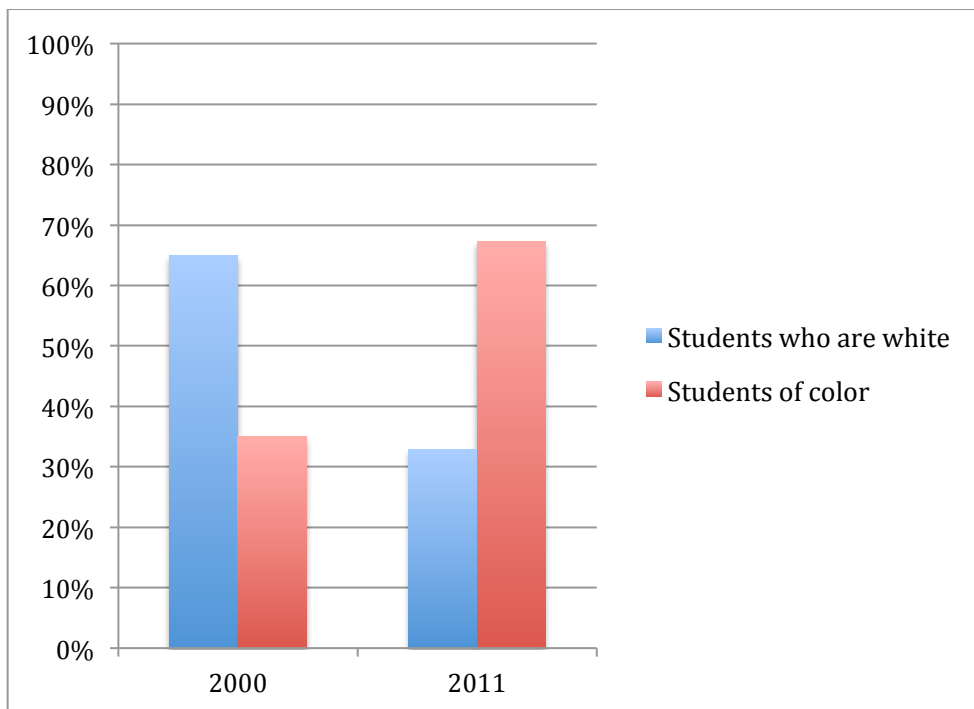
A phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990) was appropriate because this study focused on a detailed examination of human lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Through the process of the study, the subjects shared what their experiences were like and their perceptions of the meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2007).

The Selected Site for the Study

The middle school selected for this study is located in a Midwest suburb with a population of approximately 35,000. As shown in Figure 2.1, the ethnicity of the student population has shifted between 2000 and 2011. The graduation rate for the district as documented by the state's Department of Education has dropped significantly from over 90% in 2010 to 64.7% in 2012. This middle school serves approximately 800 students in grades six through eight. The student ethnicity delineates as follows: Hispanic 39%; White 30%; Black 21%; Asian 7%; two or more races 2%, and American Indian 1%. The building has

69% of the students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program--almost double the state rate of 37%. With approximately 60 staff members, the student to teacher ratio is 14:1.

Figure 2.1. Shift in the Diversity of Student Population in Selected Middle School
from 2000 to 2011



In order to maintain confidentiality for the selected school site, citations for the above demographic information are not included in the reference list. In personal communication with the coordinators of this middle school site, I learned about the structure and process of their mentoring program. Again, to maintain confidentiality of the middle school site, this communication is not cited in the reference list.

This middle school has been implementing Check & Connect[®], a comprehensive mentoring model (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), consistently beginning in the 2007-08 school year. The school has maintained steady leadership of the mentoring program and process used with the mentors. Since the beginning of the program, two principals have

served the building, both supportive of the effort and demonstrated that support through providing financing of the program. The same two school counselors have shared the coordination role for this school-based mentoring program since its inception. Students mentored are in seventh or eighth grades; and keeping to fidelity of the CC model (Christensen et al., 2012), students are mentored for both years if possible.

Each year in the spring, the principal notifies the coordinators of the approved budget for the next year's mentoring program. Each mentor receives an annual stipend of \$400 per year per student mentored. From the approved budget, the coordinators then know the number of mentors they can have for the next school year. The program also provides up to \$50 per student to be used for student and/or parent events, incentives such as high school gear for the eighth graders, gift cards, or a personalized hat for academic improvement.

At the end of each school year, the coordinators review data on students showing signs of disengagement through attendance, behavior, below grade level test scores, and/or failures in coursework. They provide the sixth grade teachers with a list of students that meet the building criteria based on truancy, behavior referrals, and/or low grades. The sixth grade teachers then prioritize that list to determine the students they believe would not only need a mentor but also benefit from the opportunity. They may have 60 students on the list but only 16-20 available spots. The coordinators then use the input of the teachers to prioritize the list, waiting until fall to match student with mentor as the school has a high mobility rate. In the fall, the prioritized list of students, matching the number of mentors, is provided to those who have volunteered to be teacher mentors. The teachers who have agreed to mentor then review the list for selection of one to three students they would like to mentor. The school puts a priority on matches where the teacher already has established a good relationship with the

student and/or the student is in a class he/she teaches. The majority of the mentors teach the core subject areas such as math, language arts, science, and social studies. Some additional teachers such as foreign language, media, and physical education also serve as mentors.

Letters of permission to participate are sent home to parents of the students selected to be part of the mentoring program. The term parent denotes the person in that parental role, which may include a foster parent, stepparent, grandparent, sibling, or other adult with the responsibility for decision-making about the student. The teacher mentor matched with a specific student then begins communication with the parent by calling the parent as a way of introduction to not only the mentoring program but also their role as a mentor for the student. The CC model's intent is to engage, as fully as possible, the parents in a shared vision and goal for the mentoring process as well as to define how the parent wishes to stay in communication with the mentor (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). The mentor also makes contact with the student at school and introduces himself or herself, sets a time to begin meeting, and researches the student's background as available through the internal school database.

Within the school's internal data system, the teacher mentors can find specific information about the students' school that is both current and from previous years. In reviewing this data, the teacher mentor can create a baseline regarding trends in the student's attendance, behavior, and grades. In addition, the teacher mentor can find out if the student has additional plans through other supports such as an individualized education plan, a health plan, or an English Language Learner plan.

Information about the parental contact documented in the internal data base also allows the teacher mentor to glean some information about the make-up of the family from

determining whether addresses for the parents are the same, if step-parents are listed as contacts, if primary or secondary contacts are grandparents, siblings, or other relatives. It also will inform the teacher mentor if, in the case of parents not living together, there is a directive to provide information simultaneously to both parents. In addition, the database also helps the teacher mentor know what language is spoken in the home and if the priority contact speaks English. All this information is critical to the background the teacher mentors need to know prior to contacting the parents and to help in their conversations with their mentees. While this information is important, it is only factual and doesn't explain or describe the actual family dynamic as perceived by those in the parental role or by the students. This dynamic can only be discovered through establishing relationships with both the students and their families.

As part of the data monitoring, the school has three target areas for CC: grades, attendance, and behavior. The goal of the teacher mentors participating with students as part of the CC program is to increase the engagement of students in one, two, or all these areas. Table 2.1 shows the number of students served each year, the percentage of those mentored who are students of color, and the results of their annual data collection and analysis.

Table 2.1. Middle School Site Check & Connect[®] Demographics and Improvement Data

	School Year				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Demographics					
Total students served	31	37	16	31	35
Students of Color	87%	89%	94%	87%	91%

Table 2.1. Middle School Site Check & Connect® Demographics and Improvement Data (continued)

		School Year				
		2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Improvement data by Indicator						
Grades						
	Increased GPA	55%	19%	56%	42%	44%
Attendance						
	Decreased absences & tardies	55%				
	No change or decreased absences		50%	33%	43%	53%
	No change or decreased tardies		64%	67%	53%	41%
Behavior						
	Not suspended	61%	75%	60%	45%	42%
	Decreased suspension	58%	44%	33%	38%	68%
	Not sent to ISS	16%	33%	33%	38%	24%
	No change or decreased ISS	56%	50%	70%	22%	48%

Note: ISS=In-school suspension

While this study did not focus on student outcomes, these data are provided to show the program is proving to make a difference for the students who are mentored by teachers in the building.

Philosophical Assumptions and Research Design

A qualitative design was selected for this study. In a qualitative study, “researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). Creswell (2007) notes that when a researcher selects a qualitative form of study, he or she brings to that research a frame of beliefs. One of the worldviews described by Creswell (2007) is an “Advocacy/Participatory” worldview (p. 21). From this worldview, researchers strive to highlight needed action that might positively impact the lives of others. In this study,

my desire was to craft an avenue for teacher mentors to have an “active participation” (Creswell, p. 22) for their voices and experiences to be heard, acknowledged, and considered. Through this process, it was my hope to learn from the teacher mentors to assist with my own service as a mentor and that this may prove an impetus for additional research on the role of teachers as mentors to be considered by the school-based mentoring community.

Creswell (2007) describes the philosophical assumptions of qualitative methodology as reflecting the particular stance that researchers take (p. 19). Ontological assumptions (Creswell, 2007) support acceptance that the teacher mentors would provide multiple views of the reality of their experiences (p. 18). In order to respect each participant’s perspective, strategies and processes were set up that allowed for me to reflect on their experiences and how they interpreted those experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As their experiences were reviewed and documented, the participants’ own words were used to help convey the diversity of perspectives shared (Creswell, 2007). The epistemological assumption (Creswell, 2007) of qualitative research refers to the source of knowledge. This study acknowledges that the teacher mentors had knowledge from their own experiences that helped illuminate the phenomenon of serving as a teacher mentor. To access the depth of their experiences, the interviews were done with the study participants in sites selected by each of them. This allowed me to be in a location where they were not only comfortable but also allowed me to see them in their everyday context, referred to by Creswell (2007) as where they “live and work” (p. 18).

Methodological Approach

In designing this qualitative study, it was important to create an opportunity in which the study participants were empowered to tell their stories, for me to hear their voices in the

context of the setting where they do the work: their schools (Creswell, 2007). This study was focused on a psychological phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). Described by Creswell (2007), this type of approach is “focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants” (p. 59). Wanting to give voice to the participants, this phenomenological approach allowed me to ultimately identify and use their own descriptions to identify the themes and quotations directly from the teacher mentors to explain the findings (Creswell, 2007). Through this process, I came to the experiences of the teacher mentors having “bracketed” (Creswell, p. 59) my own experiences so that I could be open to looking at their experiences in new ways and to discover the essence of their experiences within that shared phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Through the study of the experiences of the five teachers mentoring at-risk middle school students, I identified patterns, themes, and relationships that bring meaning to their voices and descriptions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Having spent several years training and consulting with schools across the country to assist in implementing CC as well as also currently coordinating the initiative in my own local district, I needed to ensure that I could bracket (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) my own perception of what the experience as a teacher mentor was and to allow the study participants to share about the role from their own experiences. Since I have not served as a teacher mentor while also teaching full-time in a building, it was important to set aside my assumptions and to learn about the substance of their experiences.

Participants and Sampling

In phenomenological research, it is important that those who participate have all experienced the phenomenon focused on in the study (Moustakas, 1994). For that reason,

interviews were completed with teacher mentors from a single middle school located in the Midwest. To select the participants, a combination of a criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) and a convenience sample (Creswell, 2007) was used. The criterion for participation included teachers who either currently or in the past: (1) taught at the middle school selected for the study; and (2) had mentored a student for a minimum of one school year. With the criteria that all study participants were part of the sustained program within this middle school, there was some level of assurance that they each were conducting their mentoring based on the core elements of the CC model including:

- (1) a mentor who works with students and families for a minimum of two years; (2) regular checks, utilizing data schools already collect; (3) timely interventions, driven by data, to reestablish and maintain the student's connection to school and learning, and to enhance the student's social and academic competencies; and (4) engagement with families (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012, p. 1).

As a convenience sample, this school was selected because it had a school-based, CC mentoring program sustained for several years that used teachers as mentors. It was located within driving distance that allowed me to conduct the interviews with each participant over a series of weeks while working at my full-time job.

Once the proposal received committee approval, submission for approval was requested from the Drake Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures. Based on the recommendation of IRB, I added a line item to the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix E) and in the member check process addressing deductive disclosure (Sieber, 1992). Deductive disclosure can potentially happen if, in the rich descriptions (Creswell, 2007) of study participants, the participants become identifiable to others within the research reports (Sieber,

1992). In honoring the confidentiality of the study participants, demographic traits and descriptions have been purposefully provided in ranges rather than specific numbers, such as age, number of years teaching, and number of mentors served.

Over the course of writing the proposal, I made contact with the CC coordinators at the selected middle school. Initially, I contacted the middle school and asked for a list of mentors that fit the criteria selected. Upon receiving the permission of the principal and mentoring program coordinators, who served as gatekeepers (Creswell, 2007), they provided the emails of 20 current and past teacher mentors who had worked at this middle school. I sent flyers to the school that were distributed by the building coordinators to the teacher mentors on the list who were still teaching in the building. The building coordinators assisted recruitment by not only providing me the names but also sharing about the study and my possible contact at a staff meeting. They reiterated that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Personalized invitation emails (see Appendix A) were sent to each of the 20 on the list. The email invitations sent to teacher mentors in the building (1) explained the study and the process for interviews including the amount of time requested; (2) invited them to participate; (3) provided the Informed Consent Form as an attachment (see Appendix B) for their review; (4) provided them with the URL of a brief demographic survey (see Appendix D) and (5) asked them to respond via email if they were willing to participate. The Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) documented the purpose of the study; the process to be used; assurances that no real names of school buildings, communities, teacher mentors, or students would be used; assurance that no individual student would be identified; the timeline proposed; the right of respondents to withdraw at any time from the study; and the plan for the member check. The purpose of the survey was to capture demographic information so

that I might select participants for the study based on diversity within the participants. This effort proved unnecessary since I ultimately didn't secure more participants than needed.

Initially there were only four responses with only two responding affirmatively. A second email inquiry was sent to those who had not responded. This process occurred during one of the worst winters in years; and everyone was dealing with schedules constantly changing for late starts, early releases, and school closures. I felt that, in the midst of seemingly unending weather frustration, my emails and study most likely were not a priority for these teacher mentors. Originally, the number of participants proposed for the study was between five and seven. When the first five were secured, I rejoiced. However, concerned that I had no extra participants if one should drop, a third and final email was sent to those who had not responded. Three more responded; however, they were either not interested or unable to commit due to time. One person responded that he was overwhelmed, didn't have time, and also didn't feel he had been a successful mentor. I did contact him and let him know that I would welcome him in the study to learn more about what didn't work for him; but I didn't receive a response and, out of respect, didn't contact him again.

While the survey to purposefully plan for diversity among the study participants was not needed, I was pleased with the resulting diversity among the five secured study participants. Four of the participants were female with one male. Three of the participants were currently teaching at the middle school site. The other two were no longer teaching at the school. One had taught there for over 10 years and recently moved to the high school. The other teacher mentor had taught at the site for over 10 years but was currently on a year sabbatical. The ages of the participants ranged from late twenties to over 50 years old; the number of years teaching ranged from two to close to 20. The experience mentoring students

ranged from two to over 25. Once the participants agreed to participate and provided the Informed Consent Document (see Appendix E), I started to set up appointments.

Data Collection Procedures

Originally I had planned to use a series of three interviews (Seidman, 2006), with each teacher mentor selected for the study. The intent with this process was to gain meaning and understanding by learning about their experiences within the context of their lives. Each interview was to build on the previous one to provide what Seidman (2006) calls “a foundation of detail that helps illumine the next” (p.19). The reality was that the timing of the interviewing was also impacted by the continuing brutal winter challenges. With numerous school closings and the effect on the time available for both the study participants and myself, it did not work out to do the interviews in the three steps for each participant.

Since specific parameters were given for which weeks would be used for interviews, it was important to maintain the timeline upon which the participants had agreed. To allow for us to see each other while communicating electronically, methods such as Skype or Google Hangout for the first interviews were suggested. However, the study participants were either not familiar or comfortable with using those methods. Two first interviews by telephone each lasted approximately 20 minutes. The other three study participants agreed to combine the first and second interviews into a longer in-person interview, each lasting approximately one hour and 15 minutes. Because we were communicating often through email, the time together felt very comfortable. Having this extended time provided a positive result of a deeper level of conversation about their experiences as well as not being as concerned about watching the clock. Following each interview the study participants were

provided with a \$10 gift card. For the study participants where we combined the first and second interviews, they received two gift cards following that interview.

Each study participant selected the location of the interview that allowed him or her to be comfortable and an environment quiet enough for quality recording. Two of the interviews took place in the teacher mentor's current classroom. These classrooms were traditional classrooms with individual student desks, teacher's desk, marker boards, bulletin boards, windows to the outside, and posters on the walls. For one of the interviews, we sat in student desks facing each other. In the other, the teacher mentor sat at her desk, and I sat in a chair pulled up beside her. One interview took place in an office of the media center. We sat across from each other at a table surrounded by computers and bookshelves. One took place in another area of the middle school where the teacher mentor serves as a monitor for student use after school. One interview took place in a local coffee house. The volume of the coffee house was challenging, but the recording was still clear enough for transcription.

Through the interview process, using a protocol with primarily open-ended questions (see Appendix A), the teacher mentors did "reconstruct [their] experience within the topic under study" (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). Participants were given the opportunity to select pseudonyms; but they declined, so in the working documents, transcripts, and draft findings chapter sent to the participants for a member check, study participants were identified only by the first letter of their name. In finalizing the findings chapter, I selected pseudonyms for the teacher mentors. It was not necessary to assign any other pseudonyms to protect confidentiality as no specific students or other school staff was identified by name in the interview process.

After addressing the content questions for the first and second interview data collection as documented in the interview protocol (see Appendix E), the study participants agreed to meet together in a focus group as the third and final interview and member check. A focus group, as described by Krueger (1994) provides for a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (p. 6). Each participant received a draft of my findings chapter via email prior to meeting in person. We met in a quiet and protected area of the media center of the school. Using open-ended questions (Krueger, 1994), the participants had time not only to get to know each other and share their own perceptions of the findings but also to elaborate on points made by others in the group. During this conversation, I described the purpose of the member check and again clarified they had an opportunity to share any concerns regarding potential deductive disclosure (Sieber, 1992). The participants asked questions and clarified statements from the findings. With regard to deductive disclosure (Sieber, 1992), after some clarification and discussion among the participants, we agreed to remove some data of concern from the study findings. Following the focus group, each participant received a \$10 gift card. All the interviews and the final focus group were digitally recorded on a hand-held digital device. I completed field notes during and following each interview. Transcriptions were completed for each of the interviews. Using a constant comparative (Creswell, 2007) process, transcripts were reviewed prior to the next interview.

In an effort to learn more about the study participants individually and collectively, each of the teacher mentors was provided with a book and code to complete the Clifton StrengthsFinder (CSF) 2.0[®] (Rath & Conchie, 2008),

The CSF is an online measure of personal talent that identifies areas where an individual's greatest potential for building strengths exists. By identifying one's top themes of talent, the CSF provides a starting point in the identification of specific personal talents, and the related supporting materials help individuals discover how to build upon their talents to develop strengths within their roles. (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 239)

Donald Clifton, an educational psychologist, is recognized for the philosophy behind CSF. Through his research a philosophy emerged based on the belief that excellence is achieved more consistently when people concentrate their effort on building their strengths and also address their weaknesses (Rath & Conchie, 2008).

CSF is widely used across many facets of business, industry, government, and education (Rath & Conchie, 2008). It has become a recognized tool for assisting not only individuals to learn more about their natural talents and strengths but also to assist teams of people working together to better understand and appreciate the strengths and differences among the team (Rath & Conchie, 2008). The CSF is used by managers to develop their teams allowing the positioning of people in their work based on their strengths.

Each teacher mentor completed the survey through the on line system and emailed me their top five strengths as designated by the CSF (Rath & Conchie, 2008). These were then compared based on the four theme areas within the CSF including: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking (Rath & Conchie, p. 24, 2008). The intent was to identify if there were any commonalities of themes or strengths across the five study participants.

All data from this study is kept in a password protected computer and back-up system or a locked file drawer. Recordings of the interviews were deleted from the recording devices once transcripts were completed. The data in the computer, back-up system, and files will be kept for a minimum of three years following the completion of this dissertation.

Data Analysis Procedures

An iterative and inductive cycle of analysis (Smith, 2007) was used to identify emerging observations and themes from the data as they were being collected. Following each interview, field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were completed on perceptions of the interview and included information about the behaviors of the participants expressed through facial expression, body language, and tone of voice that would not be readily apparent through the transcripts. These reflections also included thoughts about experiences from the teacher mentors that were surprising or puzzling. Often, this led to returning to the teacher mentor for clarification or returning to the literature. In hindsight, the field notes were one of my weakest resources. The field notes would have been a greater resource during the analysis process if they had been more structured, typed, and fleshed out. In reviewing the transcripts and notes, a constant comparative method (Straus & Corbin, 1990) was used for concurrently collecting data and comparing it to identify themes and sorting the data into categories (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

A structured analysis process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used, including reading and re-reading, initial note-taking, developing emergent themes, identifying the themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, and looking for patterns across participants. Listening multiple times to the recordings while making notes in the margins of the transcripts through a constant comparative analysis process (Straus & Corbin, 1990)

began to generate consistent themes across the study participants. Themes to be codified and analyzed were identified within the data following each interview adding to the list of themes as new ones emerged (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Using a multi-level, color-coded (Straus & Corbin, 1990) process with small colored sticky tabs, the various themes were identified in the transcripts and field notes. Evolving themes led back to the literature to further investigate culturally responsive teaching and teachers as servant leaders. Using the same color-coded tabs (Straus & Corbin, 1990), the themes in the literature were also identified. Returning to the data multiple times over the course of several weeks, I continued to review and revise the identification and coding into themes and categories (Smith et al., 2009) until the data was saturated and no new insight was appearing from the data (Creswell, 2007). Originally, 18 themes and subthemes were identified. In order to look more closely at the data within each theme, the transcripts were cut apart based on the color-coded thematic identification. I lettered each transcript with the first letter of the participants' names multiple times down the side prior to cutting apart the transcripts for tracking back to particular participants for inclusion in the findings. The pieces from each transcript were then taped on letter-sized pieces of paper on which the color-coded headings of the themes had been generated via computer. The data under each separate theme was then reviewed and notes made about the teacher mentors' experiences relating to that specific theme to identify patterns and specific content either consistent among the participants or unique.

This process was time consuming, and the amount of data was substantial. I also spent time away from the data allowing myself to sit silently on my porch or at the Arboretum, allowing all the various themes to tumble together in an attempt to pull out an overall sense of the study participants and the essence (Creswell, 2003) of their experiences.

Following this process, I then spread out the various piles of the color-coded pieces of transcripts across my living room and lived with them for several days. This process allowed me to look at the data in total as well as in detail. It also created a venue for sitting on the floor and physically trying various combinations, identifying inter-related themes, or omitting themes. This process ultimately resulted in the final paring down to 11 themes.

As suggested in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), careful record-keeping was done to track the emerging themes and provide a process to maintain, label, and secure all aspects of the data: written consent forms, labeled digital files of interviews, filed transcripts, data identified from the same study participant, as well as appropriate protection and back-up of computer-based data. This administrative organization allowed me to track data back to the original source and be in contact with a participant if questions arose (Smith et al., 2009).

Although the ultimate interpretation of the data is based on my perception of the participants' feelings and thinking, I took great care to release any preconceived ideas or judgments from my own personal experiences and to focus on only what the participants shared about their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). As Seidman (2006) states, "...it is important the researcher identify his or her interest in the subject and examine it to make sure that the interest is not infused with anger, bias, or prejudice. The interviewer must come to the transcript prepared to let the interview breathe and speak for itself" (p. 117). At times, I was challenged to move past my own assumptions and to let the voices of these teacher mentors help me to reach some new thinking about the role of a teacher mentor (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Member Check

Conducting a member check provides an avenue for establishing credibility of a qualitative study (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Merriam, 2009). The member check allows for a researcher to ensure that the participants' experiences and descriptions have been translated with accuracy in the findings (Krefting, 1999).

As described before, the member check was done in a focus group (Krueger, 1994) setting with all five participants. They each received a copy of the draft analysis via email the night before we met in person. During the focus group, they were provided time to request clarifications, changes, or ask questions. This also included the opportunity to review the draft of the findings for any concerns for deductive disclosure (Sieber, 1992). From these discussions, I did remove some data from the findings based on concern about deductive disclosure (Sieber, 1992).

Internal Validity

Qualitative researchers must provide conclusions that have internal validity which means they are “drawn from the data and the match of these conclusions with reality” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 33). To create a more rich understanding of phenomenon being studied and to assist in establishing trustworthiness (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007), qualitative researchers are encouraged to utilize multiple sources of data. This study triangulated data (Anfara et al., 2002) from the interview transcripts of each of the five subjects as well as from the initial literature review, subsequent literature review, and information gleaned from personal communication with the school program coordinators.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations with a qualitative study are vital to assure the trustworthiness of both the process and the subsequent content (Creswell, 2007). The Institutional Review

Board at Drake University approved this proposal prior to any data being collected. This process assured that the human subjects within the study were protected.

All data during the process was kept confidential. The building principal and program coordinators were only provided an electronic version of the final document. Pseudonyms were used for the names of the teacher mentors. Care was taken that no other information was cited that would lead to disclosure of individuals or the study site used in the study (Sieber, 1992). I treated all participants and data with the utmost respect and confidentiality. In addition, as suggested by Yin (1989), I created a process to check the validity of the research report by using a data filing system that would allow someone to follow the “chain of evidence from the initial documentation through to the final report” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Before the interviews, I did disclose both my former role with CC and my current role with the program in my own district. I also shared that it was my work with other sites using teacher mentors that was the catalyst for being particularly interested in their experiences. I believed that from an ethical perspective, they needed to know my relationship with the mentoring model; but also disclosure allowed me to share the context of my sincere interest in their experiences as well as the possible benefits of their sharing for others working with teacher mentors. Creswell (2007) indicates that the role of the researcher is to listen closely to the participants while acknowledging their own feelings as part of the process (p. 142).

Participants in the study at all levels were provided with the guidelines and informed consent to ensure they understood their rights throughout the process, including:

- The purpose of the study and the proposed use as a doctoral dissertation that will be available to the public.

- The use of pseudonyms to protect their identity and any link to specific statements in both the raw data, in drafts, and the final dissertation.
- Voluntary participation giving each participant the right to not answer any question or to withdraw at any time from the study, for any reason.

Delimitations

Delimitations establish the boundaries for a qualitative study and assist in narrowing the scope of the study by limiting the study to specific participants (Creswell, 2003). The middle school was selected based on the implementation of the CC program (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). The intent of this study was to investigate the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990) of teachers serving as mentors to at-risk middle school students. Participants for the study were delimited to teachers from this specific middle school who: (1) were serving, or had served, as a mentor for at least one at-risk student, and (2) were, or had been, doing so for at least one school year.

The phenomenon of serving as a teacher mentor was the focus of this study. It did not concentrate on the experiences of the students who were mentored or any outcomes for the students served. It also was not focused on overall student outcomes or outcomes of the program within the building. The only participants were teacher mentors meeting the above criteria. The study did not include any perceptions about the program from others either inside the building, within the district, or beyond.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was the small sample size. The original pool of participants that met the criteria for this study was limited to only 20 teacher mentors. Of that pool, only five agreed to participate. Another limitation was the short amount of time I had

with each study participant. In honoring how busy these teachers were and to ensure I would have participants for the study, we agreed to conduct the interviews over the course of just a few weeks between January and March. This timeline was challenged even further by the conditions of a Midwest winter that wreaked havoc with everyone's available time and, quite frankly, tested the patience of even the most seasoned educator with the seemingly unending cancellations, late starts, and schedule changes for make-up days.

Because this study was specifically targeted on the experiences of the teachers as mentors, it did not address the outcomes for the students they mentored. The focus for the study was on finding out more about their experiences: why they agreed to be a mentor, what made it a worthwhile or frustrating, and if they recommend it to anyone else. While not addressing the outcomes for students was intentional, it also may leave a gap for those wanting to address the viability of using teachers as mentors within school-based mentoring programs.

This study purposefully focused on one middle school that has a history with implementing the CC program using teachers as mentors. Each school building that uses CC creates its own specific criteria for referral of at-risk students to be served by mentors (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). By this site implementing CC, there was some assurance that students referred were identified by the school to be at-risk of staying in school and/or completing middle school through graduation, that data-driven decision making was being used, and that the foundational structure of the mentoring program was aligned with an evidence-based program already identified as successful for keeping students in school (Christensen et al., 2012).

Beyond this, however, another limitation of the study was that the extent or type of disengagement of their mentees, which can range from basic to intensive (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), was unknown. Additionally, there was no knowledge of the quality of mentoring the teacher was doing as perceived or evaluated by the building coordinators. Other than the teacher mentors' own perceptions, there was also no knowledge on the quality or quantity of the training the teacher mentors received.

As a qualitative study, there are limitations to generalizing the findings or conclusions to other schools with mentoring programs. As a qualitative researcher the concern is not whether these findings are generalizable to all school-based programs, but rather what other schools using teacher mentors might learn that could assist them in strengthening their mentoring process and program (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It is then left to them to "see how it fits into the general scheme of things" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 36) in their own situations.

Positionality

I formerly worked as the national coordinator and primary trainer for CC at the University of Minnesota. This position involved building networks and partnerships to promote the implementation of CC as well as to market the training to schools and communities across the United States. This role included designing and conducting training, working with a cadre of experienced trainers, and positioning CC within states as an endorsed and adopted program for wide-spread use to address student engagement and dropout prevention.

The research on CC from the University of Minnesota (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), is based on a hired person who serves solely in the school building as a mentor for a

case load of students. During my tenure working with schools across the country, one of the primary barriers to implementation of CC was the lack of resources to pay for full-time, or even part-time, people to come into the school to serve as mentors dedicated to just implementing the CC processes with struggling students. The frustration with lack of resources to implement CC with fidelity to this aspect of the model (Christensen et al., 2012) was consistent whether the catalyst for implementation was a state education department, regional education center, school district, or one school building. One modification to the research model was to use existing staff in the building as the mentors. In the last year and a half of my position with the University, this modification was the primary implementation model used in schools throughout the country implementing CC. Schools called on volunteers from all existing staff roles including para-professionals, school secretaries, aides, custodians, and the teachers. In most cases, each of these adults in the building was assigned only one student to mentor. This experience of working with these schools and seeing the growing use of teachers as mentors was the impetus for this study. In some locations, a blended structure of a full-time mentor with a larger case load, often provided through out-of-district funding, would work in conjunction with the teacher mentors allowing for more systemic integration of the initiative while also building the skills of the teachers.

With the middle school site selected for this study, while in the position at the University, I had done some presentations in this middle school; however, none of the study participants had any recollection of me having been in their site. Two participants were not working in the building at that time. Even after meeting them during the interview process, I also had no recollection of having met or worked with any of the study participants previous to this study.

Currently, my position involves the implementation of the CC mentoring intervention in a local school system in the Midwest. This district is located some distance away from the middle school site in this study but within driving distance. In this implementation in three middle schools and three high schools, we are using the blended model including Promise Fellows, teachers, and other existing staff as mentors. In 2012-13, there were 60 teachers mentoring students in our buildings. In 2013-14, that number topped 70. What is learned through this study will be used in the on-going process of implementing and refining the CC intervention in our district and working with teacher mentors in the school buildings. It will also be used as well with any additional consulting or training I may do in the future with schools using teachers as mentors or with teacher mentors.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

In all my preparation classes, I connected immediately with the process of qualitative research. The idea of being “up- close” (Creswell, p. 37) to the research subjects and giving voice to their experiences intrigued me. Perhaps because I come from a worldview of “advocacy/participatory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21), I feel compelled to know, to understand, and to share the experiences of others (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) in particular sparked my interest because it provides a chance to “understand the meaning of events and interactions” of ordinary people (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 25).

In the case of this study, my interest was in investigating and documenting the phenomenon of serving as a mentor while also serving as a teacher. Because there is a lack of research focusing on teachers as mentors for students in kindergarten through high school, the intent was to bring notice of the topic and voice to those serving in this capacity. From this study, not only my own district will benefit from what has been learned, but potentially other school districts or buildings considering or currently using teachers as mentors might learn from this study as well.

The topic for this dissertation study was selected because it is interesting from both personal and professional aspects. As described in the positionality section, this study directly pertains to my current professional position coordinating a mentoring initiative for the local district as well as a past professional position assisting schools across the country in implementing the CC mentoring model with teacher mentors. From a personal perspective, I am also a mentor. While I am a licensed teacher, I am not currently teaching in a classroom;

but the opportunity to learn from others who have been mentoring at-risk students longer than I have was also a benefit to me.

As Seidman (2006) suggests, in preparing the findings, considerable time was spent contemplating what could be learned from the experiences of the study participants by reviewing transcripts, field notes, multiple iterations of coding, and theme identification within the data. Described in depth in Chapter 3, this process has been intense, time-consuming, yet fulfilling. The days spent immersed in the data, defining and refining categories and themes (Creswell, 2007), resulted in the identification of 11 themes describing the experiences of the teacher mentors in this study.

The Participants

As described in detail in Chapter 3, invitations were originally sent to 20 teacher mentors that met the criteria: (1) a teacher who had taught at the selected middle school site, and (2) a teacher who had mentored at least one student in the school's mentoring program. After three rounds of invitations, I secured five teacher mentors for the study. They were all enthusiastic to share their stories and experiences. Once the participants submitted their Informed Consent (see Appendix E), we continued to communicate through email to set up appointments. I enjoyed their quick responses, and my motivation and enthusiasm were fueled by their interest.

Three of the study participants are currently teaching at the selected middle school site. One of the teachers had taken a year off, and the other teacher had recently moved from the middle school and is currently teaching in a position at the high school. Considering the voluntary nature of securing the study participants, I was pleased with the diversity in the

participants. They varied in total number of students mentored, age, years of teaching experience, and sex, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Demographic Information for Study Participants

	Sex	Total # students mentored			Age of mentor			# Years teaching		
		1-3	4-10	10+	20-30	31-40	41-50	1-3	4-10	10+
Rachel	F	✓				✓		✓		
Lindsey	F			✓		✓				✓
Rob	M		✓				✓		✓	
Maggie	F	✓			✓			✓		
Jane	F			✓			✓			✓

Rachel is in her early 30s. She holds a Master's in Library and Information Science and is licensed for kindergarten through twelfth grades in media teaching. Her volunteering experience is extensive, including a volunteer position in Costa Rica where she led a children's workshop, taught English to a women's group, assisted with a group of elderly, and co-led a teen youth group. She has small children and often alluded to the things she was learning from her role at school as helpful to taking care of her children. This was Rachel's first year at this middle school site, and she was new to teaching. She had spent several years in South America and was fluent in Spanish. Her role at the school was as a teacher in the media center. While Rachel was soft-spoken, she enthusiastically shared about the two students she was currently mentoring. Being in the media center, she saw her mentees often; but they were not directly in a classroom with her. With her Spanish fluency, she enjoyed being able to communicate directly in Spanish with not only her mentees but also with their parents as well. Rachel was soft spoken but clearly articulated her passion and commitment focused on the importance of providing assistance to struggling students within the school. With her past experience living in another country, she appeared to have a unique

understanding of immigrant students who come to the United States and her school, specifically of managing both a new culture and a new language.

Lindsey is also in her 30s. She has two children, a boy and girl. Lindsey was tall and stylish with a great deal of positive energy. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a minor in secondary education and a Master's degree in education. As a volunteer, her opportunities revolved around her children and their school. She served on their school foundation, as a room parent for her child in kindergarten, and taught Sunday School at her church.

Although she was currently on a year's sabbatical, she had taught for 14 years at the middle school site selected for this study. She was a Language Arts teacher for seventh and eighth grade students and had started mentoring when the middle school first started CC. She was involved in the initiative in the school for which the teachers wove together the mentoring program and a focus on culturally responsive teaching strategies. She had mentoring up to five students at a time those first years; but with her most recent year of mentoring, she had three students. Lindsey had these students in her language arts classes. Lindsey provided an historical context to the mentoring program in the school and verbally shared an appreciation for being included in the study as well as her appreciation for someone recognizing the efforts of the teacher mentors. Lindsey did indicate at our final interview that she is returning to the middle school next fall as a teacher. She shared with me during the interview that being reminded of her experiences with the students was influencing her decision about returning.

Rob is a science teacher and has been teaching at this school site for over 10 years. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biological Sciences and a Master's degree in

education. He is licensed in biological sciences for seventh through twelfth grades and general science for fifth through eighth grades. In addition, Rob has other coursework in the areas of reading and gifted and talented.

Rob has volunteered in multiple ways in his community including at the community food shelves and helping with holiday celebrations and the spring carnival at his sons' school. In addition to teaching full-time, he also works part-time at an aquarium store.

Rob presents himself in a relaxed and comfortable demeanor. We met in the weight room where he monitors the room after school so students can use it. He shared how he had mentored students in previous years; but after a school year with two frustrating mentees, he took some time off from mentoring. He was convinced this year to be a mentor again and had two students he was mentoring. Rob is a parent, and like Rachel, often compared the role of a parent with serving as a mentor. The Rob's passion for helping students was evident as he shared stories about his experiences as a mentor. His stories revealed that he not only enjoyed building the relationships, but also was able to find the humor in some of the frustrating circumstances he had to navigate as a mentor.

Maggie was a new teacher to the building and the youngest of all the teacher mentors in the study. She had taught previously for a year in another district. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Education focused on elementary through middle school and is working on her Master's in Educational Leadership. She is licensed for first through sixth grade elementary education and sixth through eighth grade communication arts and literature.

Maggie's volunteer experience through both high school and college focused on assisting at-risk youth and their families. She served as a volunteer at various programs including a food shelf, mission trips, and a homeless shelter.

Maggie is currently a Language Arts teacher for seventh grade students. She had never served as a mentor but when she started teaching at the building and was asked, she eagerly agreed to take three students to mentor. Maggie's classroom was very warm and inviting. When I arrived after school, there were students still in her classroom; and it was apparent they were very comfortable with Maggie and enjoyed being in her presence. Other students came to the door during the interview; Maggie showed warmth and the willingness to assist the students who needed it. Maggie was the only study participant who was not a parent.

Jane had taught for more than 10 years in the middle school site but had recently moved to the high school in the same district. Jane holds a Bachelor's of Science and a Master's in Teaching and Learning. She has a teaching license for seventh through twelfth grade social studies. Her volunteer experiences included Special Olympics, various volunteer coaching positions, and she had served as a leader in her church.

Jane's classroom was fairly traditional with rows of student desks. She had posters on the walls pertaining to various aspects of social studies and government. When I arrived after school, a student came in and took a test. Other students also arrived while we were talking, and she expressed her surprise and pleasure that they stopped at the door when they saw she was busy and waited for her to signal them to enter. Jane was very warm in her communications with the students, and they displayed ease with her, representative of a respectful relationship. While getting what they needed, Jane communicated high expectations; and her style with the students appeared to place the responsibility on the student but assured them she would help if needed.

Jane, like Lindsey, also started serving as a mentor when the program was initiated in the middle school site. She estimated that she had mentored over 25 students during her years at the middle school. Her information about the history of the mentoring program and the integration with culturally responsive teaching strategies was helpful to provide context for the current mentoring program at the middle school. The mentees she had were in her classroom, and she and Lindsey both participated when the program centered on multiple teachers in a grade level core team having mentees at the same time. This system was well liked by both Lindsey and Jane.

Jane's on-going relationships with many of her mentees into their high school years and during out-of-school time seemed very important to her. She demonstrated a tremendous commitment and involved her family often in the opportunities with the mentors.

Jane and Lindsey knew each other well, having worked together for years at the middle school prior to them both leaving the building. Although all currently working in the building, it did not seem as if Rachel, Maggie, and Rob knew each other very well. Other than attending the monthly meetings of mentors, there didn't seem to be any connecting experiences during the regular school day. It was interesting that during the final focus group when all five of the study participants were together, they identified that Maggie obtained Lindsey's job when she left for her year off.

Strengths of the Participants

The Clifton StrengthsFinder (CSF) 2.0® (Rath & Conchie, 2008) identifies 34 strengths that are then divided into four distinct domains of leadership strength: executing, influencing relationship building, and strategic thinking (Rath & Conchie, 2008), as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. StrengthsFinder 2.0® Strengths by Domain and Teacher Mentor Strengths

Executing		Influencing	Relationship Building		Strategic Thinking	
Achiever	R	Activator	Adaptability		Analytical	
Arranger	J	Command	Developer	M, J	Context	R
Belief		Communication	Connectedness	M, RI	Futuristic	RI
Consistency		Competition	Empathy	M	Ideation	L, RI
Deliberative		Maximizer	Harmony		Input	L
Discipline	L	Self-Assurance	Includer		Intellection	RI
Focus	R	Significance	Individualization	M, J	Learner	J
Responsibility		Woo	Positivity	M, J	Strategic	L, R, RI
Restorative			Relator			

Note: Thematic table adapted from “Strengths Based Leadership,” by T. Rath and B. Conchie. 2008.p. 24. Participants identified by letter: R=Rob, L=Lindsey, J=Jane, M=Maggie, and RI=Rachel.

Through the years of research done around the CSF (Rath & Conchie, 2008), these domains were identified as a way to consider “how leaders can contribute to a team” (p. 23). While the specific strengths “may work best for individual development...these broad domains offer a more practical lens for looking at the composition of a team”(p. 23). Each domain is described by Rath and Conchie (2008) in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 StrengthsFinder 2.0® Domain Descriptions

Domain	Description
Executing	Leaders who “know how to make things happen. When you need someone to implement a solution, these are the people who will work tirelessly to get it done” (Rath, &Conchie, 2008, p. 24)
Influencing	Leaders who “help their team reach a much broader audience. People with strength in this domain are always selling the team’s ideas inside and outside the organization” (Rath, &Conchie, 2008, p. 25).
Relationship Building	Leaders who “are the essential glue that holds a team together...(they) have the unique ability to create groups and organizations that are much greater than the sum of their parts” (Rath, &Conchie, 2008, p. 25).

Table 4.3 StrengthsFinder 2.0® Domain Descriptions (continued)

Domain	Description
Strategic Thinking	Leaders who “keep us all focused on what could be. They are constantly absorbing and analyzing information and helping the team make better decisions. People with strength in this domain continually stretch our thinking for the future” (Rath, & Conchie, 2008, p. 25).

Each of the top five strengths of the study participants from the CSF (Rath & Conchie, 2008) is shown in Table 4.2. In reviewing the various strengths and domains (Rath, & Conchie, 2008) of the teacher mentors, 10 of their combined 50 strengths fall mainly in two of the domain categories: relationship building and strategic thinking. No one participant had strengths across all four domains. Three teacher mentors had their strengths dispersed across three of the domain areas.

In looking at the individual strengths within the themes, all five of Maggie’s strengths are located within one domain, relationship building (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Julie also has a concentration within this domain, with three of her strengths under relationship building (Rath & Conchie, 2008). While it might seem that teachers mentoring students would show the greatest strengths in the domain of relationship building, two of the teacher mentors had none of their individual strengths under that domain. Lindsey and Rachel both had three of their top five strengths within the strategic thinking domain.

While interesting with regard to understanding more about each individual mentor’s strengths, with such a limited sample, there are no assumptions that can be made regarding the domains or individual strengths, as measured by CSF (Rath & Conchie, 2008), for teachers who agree to mentor at-risk middle school students. While they are part of a

Interview Process

The process of interviewing was energizing. The chance to talk to the teacher mentors doing this work provided a snapshot into not only the relationships they generate with students they mentor but also their lives as well. It was a privilege to meet such dedicated and compassionate people. They demonstrated a deep sense of commitment to being a mentor for these students, and yet they all exhibited an authentic humility regarding their work with the students and their families.

As agreed when the teacher mentors signed on to participate, the interviews took place over a five-week period of time between February and March. This agreement was made to alleviate their concerns about participation taking too much time away from their already busy schedule and to wrap up their responsibility prior to spring break. Finding time to conduct the interviews with busy teachers was a challenge. The initial intent was to conduct a series of three interviews with each participant based on the model by Seidman (2006).

The reality of a severe winter with numerous cancelled school days wreaked havoc on everyone's planning and available time. It was important to adhere to the agreements made with the study participants to keep their commitment to only a few weeks and finish before spring break. First interviews with Rachel and Jane were conducted by phone and lasted for no more than 20 minutes. With Lindsey, Rob, and Maggie, the first and second interview protocols were combined into one person-to-person interview, with each lasting close to an hour. Because we had communicated often through email, there was a comfortable sense of connection with the participants. In the interview process, the teacher mentors were warm and welcoming and immediately opened up about their experience. The longer interviews allowed more time for actual sharing from the participants since overview parts of the

original protocols were combined. The teacher mentors were relaxed, and the time together did not seem rushed.

Each interview took place in a site determined by the study participant. I enjoyed being able to interview all those currently working in a school in their school environment after the school day had ended. It allowed me, in most instances, to observe an interaction with a student and/or colleagues. There seemed to be a sense of pride from the teacher mentor that they were participating in an interview about their experiences. Stepping into their school environment also provided a context for their reflection and provided a glimpse of their classroom personality.

Being in the building and having a brief opportunity to observe students also provided a context for the environment of the school. As I arrived for interviews at the end of the school day, I noticed students hustling down the halls and out the doors to leave. Parents and busses clogged the parking lot waiting to transport the students home. The students provided a glimpse of the diversity of the study body. Only one or two of the students observed were white. The students pouring out of the building reflected the demographics of students who are predominantly black or Hispanic descent. The staff immediately inside the doors was sending them off with friendly greetings, and students were reciprocating. Students with whom I conversed to find my way through the building were friendly and courteous.

After each interview, field notes (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007) were written regarding not only the context and content of the interview but also reflections on the emotions expressed within the interview that would not be readily apparent in the transcript. Special notes were made on my own reactions in reviewing the range and depth of emotions shared by the participants as they discussed their perceived successes and challenges with their mentees.

Their stories impacted me especially deeply because of my own desire to help young people navigate their journey through the school years.

Since all the participants were working as a CC mentor, there was little overview needed about the program model; however, the younger mentors were not familiar with the significance of their school's modification of the model away from hiring full-time mentors and using existing staff. I also shared my experience with the program model and the impetus for my interest in the experience of teacher mentors. All respondents were exceptionally welcoming and enthusiastically shared their stories with me. They all displayed a genuine interest in sharing both their stories as well as advice for other teacher mentors. The teacher mentors also demonstrated a generosity of understanding for their fellow teachers who either were not mentoring students or who were not doing so with the same gusto.

It was a challenge for me to adhere to the amount of time we had agreed for the interviews. Their experiences and stories were compelling and created additional questions and avenues to explore. In every instance, the time flew by; and in some cases, I felt rushed to finish in order to respect the personal time they had given to participate.

We all agreed to have the final interview time be combined into a focus group format (Seidman, 2006). Since some of them had never met and others didn't know each other well, it was an opportunity for them to share a bit about themselves with colleagues while also discussing their roles as mentors. We used this time for them to respond to my draft of findings I had sent to them the prior evening as the member check. Originally scheduled for 30 minutes, their conversation remained animated and fruitful for about 45 minutes. Rob needed to take care of a student need during the focus group but quickly returned to continue with the group. Following the focus group leaving the building, I was surprised to feel a

sense of disappointment to be done with the formal process of talking with the teacher mentors in person. Our conversations and shared commitment to mentoring students created a feeling of connection. I had not anticipated, nor read about, this happening; and although energized by what was learned from them, it also felt like leaving friends behind.

The Experience of Being a Teacher Mentor

The interviews with the teacher mentors were invigorating and also a humbling experience for me. On the drive home after each interview, there was ample time to reflect on the content of the interview and to consider it in context with the other interviews. Each time the depth of dedication these teacher mentors had to their mentees was complemented by their authentic humility about the lengths they are going to help these students. The intensity of emotions that accompanied their shared experiences included joy, frustration, happiness, sadness, pride, futility, yet an acceptance of the realities both in the process of mentoring and in the results.

In writing about the experiences of the teacher mentors, I struggled to describe the depth of the experiences shared by these teacher mentors. I started using the term “being a mentor,” but it soon didn’t seem correct. Nichols (2011) describes that educators, “believe in—almost to a flaw—their work, the people they serve, and their mission as teachers” (p. 19). Learning about the role of teachers as servant leaders (Nichols, 2011), the term was changed to “serving as a mentor” to capture the selfless and caring actions of the teacher mentors interviewed.

Reviews of the transcripts and field notes unveiled a challenge to find a description in the literature that would explain what drives these five exceptional people to (1) open their hearts and lives to these at-risk students; (2) to give of their precious time in the midst of a

full teaching schedule; (3) to not judge the student or their family; (4) to not only see, but expound on the strengths of these students; (5) to persevere through often seemingly unsuccessful attempts to help the student succeed; and (6) to risk professional relationships in an environment where sometimes even their own colleagues are not supportive of their efforts.

What I first found in the literature was the term “empathetic disposition” (McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 433.) As McAllister and Irvine (2002) described research on empathetic disposition, they noted that it is a desired characteristic for teachers in diverse, urban schools. Empathetic disposition involves not just feeling a perspective of another but extends to feeling and being with another individual in a nonjudgmental way (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). This corresponds with the perceived capacity of the teacher mentors in this study to build and sustain authentic, caring relationships with their students. While McAllister and Irvine (2002) caution that, “empathy is a necessary, but not a sufficient, requirement for becoming a culturally responsive teacher” (p. 442) it did provide one description of the disposition demonstrated by these teacher mentors.

Ultimately, this description did not seem thorough enough. Going back to the literature, I found a compelling case for these teacher mentors as “servant leaders” (Bowman, 2005, p. 257). Described by Bowman (2005), servant leadership is “self-inflicted accountability in the service to others” (p. 257). This came out in the teacher mentors’ comments about wanting to do their mentoring the “right way.”

As the teacher mentors shared the details of their role and their commitment, the operating principles of their experience coordinated with the following description of a teacher as a servant mentor by Bowman (2005), “no longer that of controlling or managing

energy in others but rather inspiring creative energy in one's students and colleagues" (p. 257). In *The Serving Leader*, Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2003) talk about the leader being down in the trenches working to empower others to use their passions through their strengths and talents. This passion was demonstrated through the stories from the teacher mentors in this study.

With so little in the literature about teacher mentors, I felt a deep sense of responsibility to honor the experiences of the teacher mentors in this study. Without specific research on this role, the literature can provide a context (Seidman, 2006) for only separate pieces of their experiences. As a result, through most of this chapter a strong emphasis will be placed on the voice of these teacher mentors to provide a thick description (Creswell, 2007) through their own reflections.

As described in Chapter 3, while immersed in the data and numerous iterations of coding and identification of themes (Seidman, 2006), the findings of my research on the experiences of teacher mentors ultimately revealed 11 themes as shown in Figure 4.1.

Each theme is examined in greater depth in subsequent sections.

1. Relationships are Foundational in the Mentoring Process

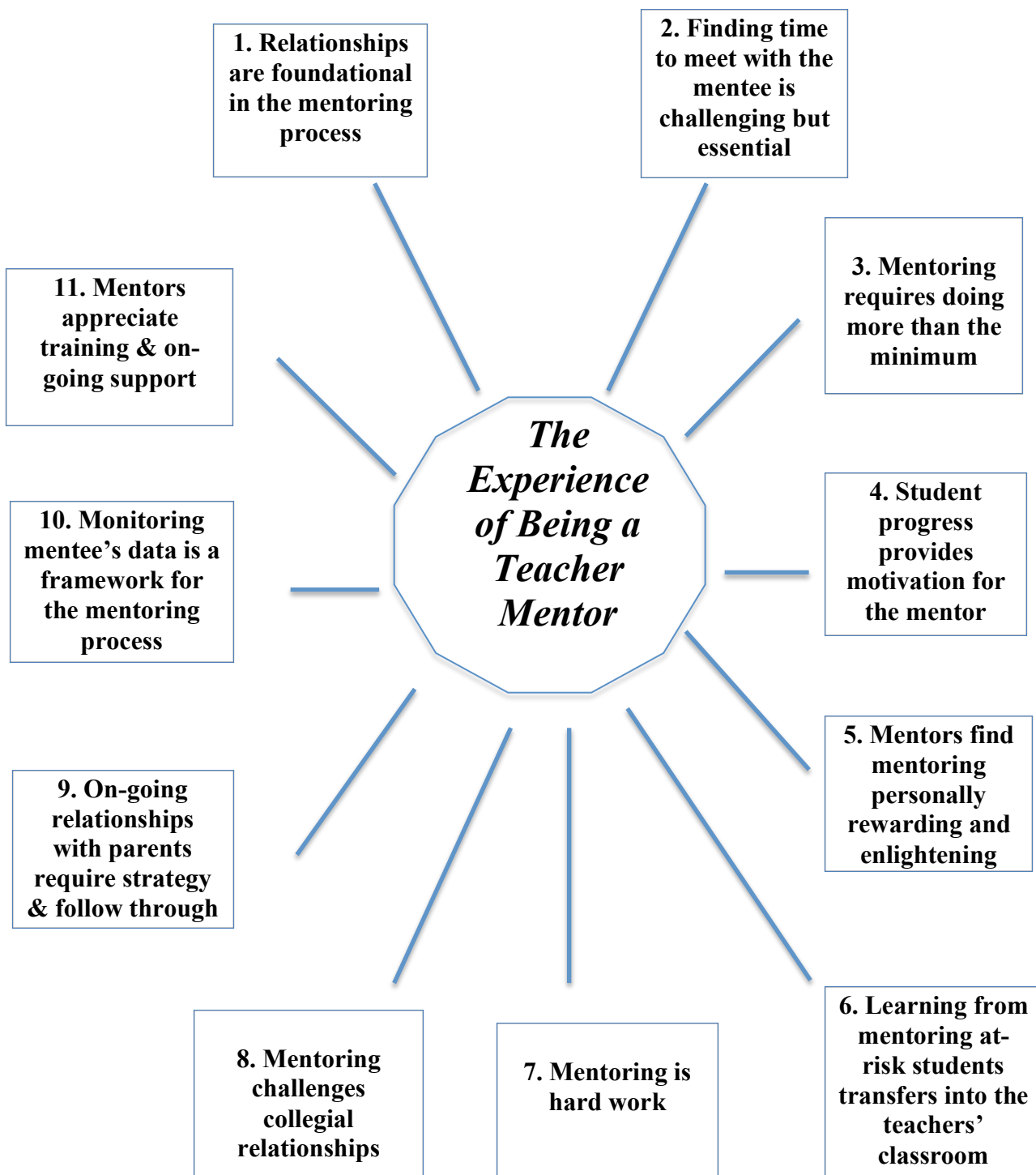
Literature abounds that emphasizes the positive impact of building relationships with students as a foundation for school-based mentoring (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Rhodes & DuBois, 2005). The teacher mentors in this study demonstrated authentic enthusiasm around the relationships with their mentees. Jane shared, "Mentoring, I love it. I love building relationships with students whether it's talking about their grades, about their character, about their families. It's important to get to know the students I work with in order to help them succeed." As educators, the mentoring role seems

to return them to the original reason they went into teaching. Rachel shared, “Part of why I even want to work in a school is to mentor kids and be another adult in their lives that can help to guide them. That’s one of my passions is to help be a mentor for the kids.”

Listening to them share their experiences, these teacher mentors exhibited a strong commitment to building relationships with their students. They seemed to accept this type of interaction with students as one of many responsibilities in the profession of education (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). Jane described her point of view:

I’ve always been one that it’s very important to me to make sure that I know more about the kids than just that they’re coming in my hour. I try to find out what their siblings do; I try and find out what kind of hobbies they do. It’s important to me to know a little more about that, so that reading body language, I’ll know when a kid is off and, hopefully, I’ll have a chance...to go over and say, ‘I noticed this about you today, are you ok? Do you need any help with anything?’

Figure 4.1. Themes from Experiences of Teacher Mentors



Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) argue that personal teacher-student relationships are “pivotal in the learning equation; they represent a humanizing and necessary element of education—a creative and even courageous act amid a sea of negative relationships and school structures precluding and even denouncing such care” (p. 2). The teacher mentors in this study embraced their role to build relationships that are emotionally and academically supportive. The classrooms I was in to conduct the interviews were physically pleasing, inviting, and colorful. With four of the five teacher mentors interviewed, either students or a colleague came through the space while we were talking. In each case, the teacher mentor’s interaction was calm, warm, respectful, leading to a sense that this was a safe and supportive place for students and colleagues alike. As the teacher mentors shared, it was evident that they provided an environment where students don’t see “their intellectual selves as distinct or separate from their emotional selves” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p.3). For example, on Jane’s wall was a poster about character, a topic she emphasized is a basic component of all her teaching and interactions with her students.

Building relationships and developing trust between the mentor and the mentee is a process. As described by Jucovy and Garringer (2008):

It takes time for youth to feel comfortable just talking to their mentor, and longer still before they feel comfortable enough to share a confidence. Learning to trust—especially for young people who have already been let down by adults in their lives—is a gradual process. Mentees cannot be expected to trust their mentors simply because program staff members have put them together. (p. 2)

This understanding of the patience required for the development of the relationship was demonstrated by all five teacher mentors. They shared that wanting the student to be

successful but identifying the “right time to push” can be a challenge. In describing this frustration, Rob said, “you really want to just tell them like it is, and you can’t necessarily say, ‘Listen, you should have done this’, and let them have it like you would if it was your own kid...Part of it is because you want them to keep wanting to come back.”

The role of a mentor comes with many expectations that need to fit into the time they have with their mentees. In the CC model, mentors are expected to provide on-going monitoring of the student data and then use that data to determine specific interventions to meet those needs (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). The descriptions of what the teacher mentors did to engage their mentees included reviewing the student data with the student including grade reports and work completion, discussing goals, getting to know each other, learning about the student’s family life, contacting teachers to find out if old assignments could still be made up, and just talking.

Overall, the five teacher mentors showed an understanding of their role as a facilitator for academic assistance, as a guide for problem solving, and as an advocate (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) for the students they mentor. As Rob said, “you can’t just ask a kid to do what you want.” All five teacher mentors agreed that the relationship is the foundation of trust that allows the student to see possibilities “through their mentor’s eyes.”

The manner in how the teacher mentors described their interactions with their mentees, along with the sincerity on their faces, fostered my confidence that these interactions were authentic. Described by Poplin and Weese (1994), the students were “trusted, given responsibility, spoken to honestly and warmly, and treated with dignity and respect” (as cited in Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p. 19)

Within the literature on both culturally responsive education and mentoring, the importance of relationships in the mentoring process, especially for at-risk students, is well documented (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013; Edwards & Edick, 2012; Gay, 2010; Karcher & Nakula, 2010; Rhodes & DeBois, 2006). In articulating why mentoring is important for at-risk students, Rachel expressed, “There are so many kids who can’t do it on their own. Their parents want to help them, but don’t always have the tools. I think if we can give these guys a safety net within school, it helps everybody.”

All the students who were mentored by the teacher mentors participating in the study are students of color. Because of privacy laws, it was not appropriate for me to ask about the status of the mentees regarding free and/or reduced lunch eligibility; however, the teacher mentors through their examples and stories gave the impression the students they mentor were from homes in the low socio-economic level.

The majority of the students who these teacher mentors serve are English Language Learners. While challenging, the language and culture of the students didn’t seem to be a barrier with communicating and building relationships. Rachel seemed to have a unique opportunity, especially with communicating with parents, as she is fluent in Spanish. With her mentee who speaks Spanish at home, she often speaks Spanish when she meets with him. With this mentee especially she felt a very close relationship developed quickly. She surmises that it may be that “it’s a comfort thing that I speak Spanish” and that her mentee may have a “subconscious understanding” that she identifies with him because she can speak his language. Because Rachel lived in Central America for three years, she also shared how that experience impacted her ability to understand how he might feel, “I guess, when I lived

in a foreign country, I know how that felt for me and I can kind of imagine what he feels like coming here to a foreign country.”

All five teacher mentors showed compassion, empathy, and a desire to help their mentees. Although what they learned about decisions made by their mentees or the situations of their families may have been an issue for others working with them, the teacher mentors demonstrated an acceptance of the mentees and two of them mentioned the importance of caring for their mentees unconditionally. In *Teachers as Servant Leaders*, Joe Nichols (2011) emphasizes the need for teachers to have the capacity for an unconditional and positive concern, respect, and support for their students.

Many at-risk students may not have always had an environment in which they feel that sense of authentic support and caring. Rhodes, Spence, Keller, Liang, and Noam (2006) note that mentors who are, “sensitive and consistent in their relationships with these youth may help them feel worthy of care” (p. 693). Nichols (2011) describes the characteristics shared by all five of the teacher mentors, when he describes, an extraordinary teacher as having:

... an unconditional positive regard for students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English speaking ability, religion, political preference, homelessness, preferences of gender, learning disabilities, or alternative lifestyles, and has the ability and desire to develop positive relationships and rapport with every student that walks into their classroom.” (p. 20)

With subjects of this study, it was obvious that they cared deeply and took the responsibility seriously, explaining that mentoring is “not something that you can do halfway.”

As Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2012) emphasize, the teacher mentors all agreed that ultimately the relationship was foundational to making progress with their mentees. Their caution was that the capacity to connect and form this strong relationship with their mentees took time and with teachers, time is at a premium.

2. Finding Time to Meet with the Mentee is Challenging but Essential

Rob summed up the single overwhelming challenge that emerged from interviewing the teacher mentors, “Finding the time is difficult. It’s very difficult.” Within every mentor program, “the first responsibility of every mentor is to meet consistently with the mentee” (Jucovy & Garrison, 2000, p. 44). With every teacher mentor in this study, each obviously accepted this responsibility; but finding the time in already busy schedules was the number one issue that challenged mentors to fulfill their responsibility. Rob added to his earlier description of trying to find time for teachers to serve as mentors as, “getting blood from a stone.”

In *Hanging In: Strategies for Students Who Challenge Us the Most* (2014), author Jerry’s number one recommendation for working with individual students is to “Allow time—months of time—to build the relationship” (p. 49). The teacher mentors were incredibly busy, and their time was at a premium. They were teaching classes, grading papers and projects, participating in school committees, going to training, writing curriculum, and leading active lives outside of school with their families. As the issue of “time” rose out of the data as a major emphasis and theme, there were three subthemes clustered under it including the number of mentees one teacher realistically can mentor, the challenges around when the mentor can meet with the student, and what they do with the time they have with their mentee.

Number of mentees. When considering using teachers as mentors, one of the first decisions that has to be made is how large a caseload to give each teacher mentor based on their available time and the intensity of the needs of the students (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) The CC research focuses on having one mentor working full-time with a caseload of 40-45 students (Christensen et al., 2012). Implementing a modification of this model using existing staff that already have a full workload during the day requires finding a balance between serving as many students as possible but not asking a teacher to mentor so many students they cannot be successful. Lindsey shared that when this middle school originally started the CC program with teacher mentors each mentor had five mentees. As Jane described, they found quickly that it was too many: “We could not keep up appropriately with the students...Our time was spread so thin already that we just couldn’t address it, so we found that three was a more ideal number.”

Even with two or three, each of the teacher mentors had students with whom they met more often than others. Two of the teacher mentors really knew very little about one of their mentees. During weeks when time was especially tight, Rob described the frustration:

Finding the time is the biggest issue...sometimes it’s when you’re having a rough week and it’s like one more thing and I’ve got to find a way to fit them in. You almost feel like you’re doing them a disservice because you’re not getting them the time they need, or wow, I kind of gave them lip service this time. I hope they didn’t notice that I wasn’t paying as much attention because I was so worried about something else. But you try; do the best you can.

Although one of the benefits described in the literature for school-based mentoring is that it provides more access to the students (Rhodes & DuBois, 2005), it still remains difficult. As

Maggie summarized, “making sure that I have this amount of time with each of them individually makes the time piece challenging.”

All five teacher mentors agreed that having two mentees was ideal; although when they did have more, they often brought them in together to their classroom. They also agreed that having just one would be optimal. As Rob shared, “If we had one you could really devote your time. If we could just get every teacher in the building to adopt one at-risk student, just take them under their wing and just do it.” The problem, they also agreed, was even though that would be ideal, the school would not be able to pay all the teacher mentors the stipend; and without it, they did not feel all teacher mentors would be willing to serve as a mentor.

When they can meet with mentees. Each teacher mentor shared his/her efforts to meet with mentees in a one-on-one time at least once a week. This time is considered a standard in the mentoring field (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Jucovy & Garrison, 2000). The teacher mentors used a variety of times during the school day to meet with students. The two primary ones were meeting during their personal preparation time by pulling them out of class and meeting with them after school. For the majority of the mentees, the teacher mentor had identified a specific day and time to meet. Others would just make it fit. As Lindsey described, “I made every effort to meet individually with the kids once a week, which meant I’d pull them from another class when I had time.”

All but one of the teacher mentors had their mentees in class. This was one of the criteria in this building for matching students and mentors. The school does looping, a system in which the teacher stays with the same students for two years (Ratzki 1998). This process worked well for this middle school’s teacher mentors. The process worked well for the

teacher mentors as it allowed them to begin their relationship with a student in seventh grade and continue with the same mentee through their eighth grade year as well. This also meets the need for an extended mentoring relationship which research has found has more potential for lasting impact (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). It becomes more of a challenge to meet with the student when mentors don't have the student in class as Rachel explained, "We try to arrange a certain day of the week to come in. He does have a class close to where my office is, so I do try to pop in once in a while to say 'hey'."

What they do when they meet with students. With time being so precious for meeting with their students, the extent of what they were trying to do to meet the numerous needs for these students was extensive. They clearly had a natural ability to create an environment where they wove together the students' prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and the ethnic identity of the student along with their own (Gay, 2010). This was demonstrated in how they sequenced, adapted, and adopted practices based on the needs of the individual mentee. We discussed at length the types of things they did while meeting with their students. As outlined by Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2012), all the teacher mentors implemented basic intervention strategies with their mentees including sharing the students' data, providing feedback often including reviewed assignments or homework that wasn't in, setting goals, discussing the benefits of doing their work and staying in school, and problem-solving (pp. 101-102). As one example, Jane shared that:

A lot of times we would clean up their binder. I would ask if they needed supplies. I would pick up supplies that they would need. We would talk about grades but sometimes if the grades weren't an issue, I would just bring a snack and I'd be like 'Hey, how are things going?' And then I would maybe talk about my life and then

they would talk about their life, so it wasn't always about, you're not doing this, you're not doing this, you're not doing this. It was I want to get to know you as a person and then this other stuff, it just ended up coming together.

The importance of and commitment to combine both the academic and personal needs within their time together (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Gay, 2010) was consistent through all the interviews. Maggie shared a similar example of what she does with her mentees when they meet:

We go over grades, do some goal setting with small goals for the quarter and goals for their future. We talk about what's going well and not so well in their classes. I give them feedback based upon what other teachers have told me about how they're doing and things that they need to work on, and things they're doing awesome at. We go over their personal stories of what's going on with their friends, or what's going on at home, and talk through some of that, and have fun.

Another consistent function of the time together with their mentees involved providing a safe place with an adult that would listen, whether being described as “a place to talk” or “shoot the bull.” Providing this safe place is a key component for successful mentoring programs and for relationships developed through culturally responsive teaching (Brough, Bermann & Holt, 2013; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Gay, 2010; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). It was obvious watching the teacher mentors' demeanor as they spoke of this time with their mentees that they, too, enjoyed this time to just relax and converse with the student.

Being a teacher mentor places the relationship in a different context than other mentoring programs (Aylon, 2011). In explaining how this relationship is different than what

he has with his other students, Rob said, “It’s much more personal. I’m good at sharing with my students things about my personal life, but I will tell them things that I would never tell my class.” As another example, Rob said, “Or we’ll break rules, like let’s get your cell phone and show me your pictures of your baby sister that was born.”

3. Mentoring Requires Doing More than the Minimum

Talking with the teacher mentors, reviewing the transcripts, and listening to the digital recordings over and over, one theme was consistent across all study participants. None of these individuals was satisfied with doing the minimum. Nichols (2011) described this as a type of faith, not in the religious sense, but as a focus and belief in the positive. All five teacher mentors exhibited exceptional belief in their students. Nichols (2011) talks about teachers as servant leaders having that faith in their students to learn, grow, and thrive no matter what the circumstances of their lives. The role of these teacher mentors showed a depth of commitment to not only help their mentees navigate through their middle school years but also to help their mentees develop their own self-efficacy and create positive relationships with their teacher mentor and with others inside or outside of the school. While often the teacher mentors were dealing with their mentees having made poor choices, they continued to be dedicated and committed to the students. Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2012) note “persistence-plus” (p. 4) as a key element for mentoring. This capacity to not give up and to providing unconditional support as is also noted by Brough, Bermann, and Holt (2013) as an important characteristic for a mentor.

One of the concerns about school-based mentoring shared by Rhodes (2002) is that school-based mentors may focus so much on the academic progress of a student that it may override more social activities that could have greater impact on the bonding between a

mentor and a mentee. Although I understand how this could be a concern with all the emphasis place on teachers to positively impact academics, with all five teacher mentors in this study, their stories demonstrated that the demands they placed on themselves did not end with academics, at the once a week meeting, or even at the school door. They each provided their own version of what I consider going above and beyond expectations to help their mentees. It is important to share these stories from the voices of the teacher mentors as they more fully inform the experiences and commitment shown through them. Jane shared about the investment in these students:

If any of our Check and Connect kids got into trouble, we were there as an advocate at their meetings. If we knew, such and such just happened, then one of us would cover a class so that one of us could go down there and sit down with them and be a part of that meeting so that they knew that I'm in for the long haul. It's not just about academics; I've invested in you.

The stories from the mentors provided a glimpse into the power of the relationships established with their mentees and their desire to have their mentee know and feel that caring for them was beyond just the importance of schoolwork. The personal touches also allowed the teacher mentors' personality and human side to come out. One teacher mentor, Lindsey, lit up as she told about the year that, "every Tuesday I'd make chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen and have the kids stay after. Sometimes I'd even drive them home from school." She also shared that because she had mentees with attendance issues she would often gather their homework and drive it to their house, she would do conferences at the student's home because their family didn't have transportation to come to conferences at the school, and she

found ways to help that also gave her a new awareness of the simplicity of meeting their needs. Lindsey explained that on one occasion:

I picked up laundry detergent for the kid. She had an odor issue, and her family didn't have laundry detergent. You and I wouldn't necessarily think that's a big deal, but when I went to buy it, I thought, this is twenty bucks. I never really look at that.

Bernstine-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) found that students do have a desire to have a close relationship with their teachers, especially when the student has limited access to parents and other adults. This may be why some of the mentees maintain on-going contact with their teacher mentors. Jane felt she had some great successes with students and many of the relationships established through mentoring still continue:

My best group is now seniors and I still keep in contact with them. That was part of it. Another part is it just doesn't end in the classroom. I would make sure that if they were in a play or if they had a game or if they had something, I would go and watch it. It wasn't all the time, but I would make sure that they saw me outside of the school day.

Providing access to food for their mentees was common among all the teacher mentors. Knowing that their mentee's life context often provided limited meals, or other opportunities most of us take for granted, the teacher mentors used availability of food as an incentive for their students. Rob described his efforts to incentivize his mentees' goals, saying:

I've made some promises with the current kids I have because I really do think that they've been doing a great job. If certain criteria are met, we'll do McDonalds or

something like that. I haven't done it yet because they haven't met their end of the bargain.

The teacher mentors also used food as an enticement for the mentee to connect. One participant, Lindsey, shared her strategy of keeping snacks in her classroom as a way to have her mentees reach out to her: "If they didn't get breakfast, they'd stop in immediately in the morning and pick something up before they went to class."

The teacher mentors were providing these special opportunities for their mentors, and others in their classroom, out of their own pocket. While not a rare occurrence for teachers to spend their own money on needs in the classroom, it still demonstrates the level of commitment the teacher mentors had to their mentees. While this middle school does offer a small stipend of \$400 for being a mentor, they shared that it was not uncommon for some mentors to refuse to submit for it. Although two of the mentors indicated that the stipend was definitely a consideration, it seemed the stipend was more about a justification to themselves that they were being compensated for spending that extra time because some of the things they would have done within their prep time would have to be done outside of school. The school also had a fund for mentors to purchase things for their mentees; however, the study participants again displayed their humility while sharing that they rarely turned in the receipts for reimbursement.

Each teacher mentor shared his/her own unique ideas and as to how he/she acknowledged and affirmed mentees beyond grades and any recognition the school provides. One participant, Maggie, talked about creating encouraging notes for her students and how at holiday time she, "got them a stocking with school supplies and just other things to kind of

keep them motivated and keep them excited, and realize that Check and Connect is a cool thing and it's not that somebody's always on your back."

The efforts of the teacher mentors extended far beyond what is needed to be successful in the day-to-day study skills, doing homework, and checking on attendance at school. They were committed to a relationship with their mentees both personally and academically (Gay, 2010). Particularly inspiring was how the teacher mentors were also creating situations where they were teaching or assisting their mentees in being in service to others. Nichols (2011) emphasizes the importance of teachers being a role model:

Students need to see in us, their teachers, a strong work ethic, character, self-discipline, self-regulation, self-confidence without arrogance, and our passionate desire to serve their needs, whatever those needs, might be at the moment. (p. 50)

Although each teacher mentor had some type of story in this regard, one particular touching story revealing this capacity in the teacher mentors was shared by Rob: "One of my students this year was telling me it's his sister's birthday tomorrow. I said did you get her anything? 'No.' I happened to have this stuffed animal under my desk and I said give her this. She'll love it." Another student had the chance to go on a holiday shopping trip as part of a local police program for students living in poverty. Rob shared that following that experience, he and his mentee had a chance for the student to reflect on the opportunity provided by the local police department, including how it felt to be able to buy gifts for his family.

4. Student Progress Provides Motivation for the Mentor

The importance of the teacher mentor and mentee relationships included the potential impact on the achievement of these at-risk middle school students. As found in emerging

research, “relationships between teachers and students have an impact on students’ motivation, learning, and attitudes toward school” (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013, p. 18).

The outcomes for students who are mentored are, of course, a guiding reason for this mentoring program. While this study was not focused on student outcomes, the on-going status and ultimate success of their mentees in middle school and beyond was important to the mentors. Gay (2013) has found that “teachers’ expectations and sense of professional efficacy are interrelated” (p. 67). In expressing his desire, Rob said, “I want to see some results. I want to see them doing better and I want to see positives.”

While the study participants demonstrated their unconditional support for their mentees, it was also evident they are motivated by changes in their mentees (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000). The teacher mentors recognized that change for these students in academics would be slow and they seemed thrilled with even the small successes. Gay (2013) in describing teachers using culturally responsive techniques notes, “Caring teachers place students at the center of the learning orbit and turn their personal interests and strengths into opportunities for academic success” (p. 50). When sharing about any positive change they’ve witnessed for their mentee, the teacher mentors’ eyes sparkled and there was pride in their tone of voice. For example, Rachel shared that at recent conferences one of her mentees was doing poorly in classes. She went to his parent-teacher conference, and she was elated as she shared, “the next day he started turning in assignments.” She continued, “Almost daily now he comes in since then, to see if his grades have gone up because he’s working on getting his stuff in. So it’s at a very exciting point right now, and I’m hoping he hangs onto that trend.”

Within all the interviews, the teacher mentors also shared the inconsistencies of seeing their impact. “It isn’t always easy,” Rob shared:

There were some things, like I would meet and I would feel like I was having a breakthrough and we would have a really good conversation. One of my students had some major anger issues. This kid would go from ‘hi, how are you?’ to pounding on another kid in a matter of seconds. We would have conversations about things that you can do, and he would nod his head and tell me what I wanted to hear, and then literally ...15 minutes later he was in the office. He’d have gotten in a knockdown, drag out fight with somebody. It’s like, well, obviously that didn’t sink in very well.

The importance of teacher-student relationships is supported by research documenting that these relationships have a positive impact on students’ learning, engagement which can lead to higher student achievement (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). Listening to the descriptions from the teacher mentors, I noted a wide range of perceived successes with their mentees. With each teacher mentor, success no matter whether large or small, they seemed to take more pleasure in seeing changes in the student’s effort and engagement over even any academic outcome. In one instance, a teacher mentor was thrilled that after several months of not showing up, her mentee came and was willing to talk. They were, however, also extremely proud when their mentees showed changes in their academic progress. As Rob said, “last year his grades were awful, like D’s and F’s, and this year he’s had a couple of As, couple of Bs and then Cs and like an F here or there.” When sharing her mentee was given a Student of the Month award Maggie said, “I didn’t even nominate him...To me that’s like wow, I’m having some success! I’m doing something right!”

Knowing that their mentoring relationships are short term and will only last while the student is in middle school, all of the teacher mentors I interviewed seemed to just accept this as a shared reality. Researchers such as Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2014) emphasize the importance of mentors making a commitment for a sustained minimum of two years as a key element of the CC program (p. 4). The middle school site in this study makes that possible by starting the mentoring process in seventh grade and ideally it continues through eighth grade. The reality is that with the high mobility of the students at the school, having the student in the building both years may not be possible.

As Rob shared, “There’s not always going to be data that’s saying what you’re doing is being effective. The fact that maybe that kid never goes to jail was the ultimate effectiveness of it, but it’s hard.” Not seeing the ultimate impact, however, did not appear to impact the perseverance and persistence these mentors have to their role. Bowman (2005) aptly describes this same sense of commitment in his description of teachers as serving leaders who “seize daily opportunities to make subtle differences in their students’ lives across time” (p. 259). Jane described this part of their role when she said,

Chances are we’re never going to see the impact we made on them...just knowing that as much as we feel like we’re making absolutely no difference in their life, that we actually are...we hope that we run into them and we find out what they’re doing, but as teachers we just know that most likely we are never going to know.

In rare instances, such as with Jane who is now teaching at the high school, teacher mentors may have the chance to see some result of the efforts made by the mentors in the middle school. She shared numerous stories about her former mentees, including one where the relationship continued beyond the mentee’s middle school years and is still active. She

and her husband attended events, kept in regular contact, and even invited the former mentee out to dinner with their family. The result is a young man that has found someone to trust in his middle school years who has proven they are there for him beyond that period of his life. He recently came to the family, albeit reluctantly, and asked for help with needed school supplies. Jane was obviously touched and pleased that he had asked and they could provide.

5. Mentors find Mentoring Personally Rewarding and Enlightening

The positive impact of a teacher mentor is not only felt by the student, but by the teacher mentor as well. Teachers who actively pursue more individual relationships with students at a human level not only seem to positively influence academics but also feel a sense of personal reward more deeply (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013).

The pride in accomplishment, perseverance, and student outcomes was readily apparent on the faces of the study participants as they spoke about their experiences. As noted by Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013), “positive mentoring relationships with students inspire teachers’ work and give them a deep sense of purpose” (p. 46). The teacher mentors exhibited a genuine interest in their students, the context of their lives, and their belief that they can make a difference.

Perhaps as they have recognized the students’ needs for human connection, they have also realized the same for themselves by engaging in deeper and more intensely personal relationships with their mentees. Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) describe a sense of intrinsic reward that teachers gain from these relationships as teachers cite a reward in “getting to know teenagers and watching them grow” (p. 53). This sense of purpose and significance was obvious in the descriptions from these teacher mentors. As more emphasis

is placed on teachers to positively impact test scores, being a mentor may provide an avenue for teachers to experience the personal reward of teaching more deeply.

The teachers interviewed also pinpointed how working with these middle school students as a mentor impacted their personal awareness about at-risk students including their cultural needs. Although not found as a primary strategy of mentoring programs in any of the literature, when using teachers as mentors, it is perhaps a significant benefit to those participating as well as other students and faculty in their circle of influence. Describing how her personal awareness increased through mentoring, Lindsey said:

I think what I didn't understand before was how overwhelming school is for kids who come from disadvantaged homes, or who have school issues or behavior problems. I just never really understood how hard it was for them to organize, for them to set goals. I always knew that these kids had kind of these grandiose plans of their future, and I always thought but you're not doing your work now, you have to do this in order to get to the next step. I didn't really realize that these kids just weren't getting that. So I think that Check and Connect helped me understand that, and it also helped me to work with the kids to set small goals so that the big goals can be attainable.

Rob also shared how mentoring helped change the way he viewed struggling students:

You get a more humanistic look at them, or you get a chance to see them as people...you try not do this, but a traditional teacher view, you see they don't want to do their homework because they're lazy. You get that viewpoint of them, but then as a mentor when you see some of the things and you get to know these kids really on a personal level, you realize that they didn't do their homework because their sister was

up all night screaming and because they were up all night babysitting because Mom was doing whatever. You definitely get a different perspective...this helps me see it from their eyes a little bit.

These reflections show the growth not only in awareness but also in understanding and empathy, for the life and cultural context of at-risk students (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013; Gay, 2010) as an important aspect of the teacher mentors' experiences.

Three of the study participants shared stories of how their mentees are filling adult roles following their day at school and how those responsibilities don't allow for them to do homework, get enough sleep, or "be a kid." The conflicts in prioritization between the students' lives outside of school and the responsibilities of students to their school work and attending school creates a difficult challenge for the teacher mentors to address. Describing the realities of one of her mentees, Jane reflected:

A lot of times, they don't do their work. I'll say, 'what's the deal? What's going on? Tell me about your day.'...then he's like, 'Well, my mom and dad are home half-hour before they go to work and then I go walk up and get my brother and sister from the bus. Then I make dinner for everybody, then I help them do their homework.'

6. Learning from Mentoring At-risk Students Transfers into the Mentor Teachers'

Classroom

Listening to the teacher mentors talk about their role with their mentees and the impact it had on their awareness and understanding, I also heard them share how these experiences had impacted their work in the classroom. The responses reflected that the mentors' experiences increased their realization of the needs all students may have that are often unknown to teachers. The two younger and more inexperienced

teachers mentoring for their first time seemed to be impacted more strongly than those teacher mentors who had been mentoring and teaching for some time. There seemed significance to these responses because the impact on the individual teacher from mentoring two or three students each year appeared to transfer to their understanding, expectations and strategies for the other students in the classroom. In contrast to volunteer mentors often used in school-based mentoring or even a full-time mentor hired to come in the building with the CC model (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), a teacher serving as a mentor perhaps provides a way to more deeply impress on teachers the diversity of need in their classroom and ultimately multiply the positive impact of what they learn to classrooms as well. The opportunity for teachers to learn through relationships with at-risk students can help them better understand how students who are ethnically diverse learn. As Gay (2010) explains, “This is necessary because the processes of learning—not the intellectual capability to do so—used by students from different ethnic groups are influenced by their cultural socialization” (p. 174). Although not all students from any given culture or ethnic background learn in the same way, Gay (2010,) suggests Characteristics of learning styles are pedagogically promising to the extent that they illuminate patterns of cultural values and behaviors that influence how children learn, and they provide functional directions for modifying instructional techniques to better meet the academic needs of ethnically diverse students (p. 174).

In sharing the realization that mentoring helped her better understand the needs of all her students, Maggie said, “I need to be doing this not just for my Check and Connect kids, but for all of my students.” Although the time to do so intensively with all students is not

realistic, she did grow in her realization of how the needs of her mentees were examples of the needs of all her students. She shared that as a first year mentor at the school:

I enjoy Check and Connect so much. I think having a lot of students in one year, you're just the classroom teacher and you don't have the built-in relationships. You see these students who aren't trying, or maybe are disengaged or have other things going on and you kind of just accept it for how it is. But Check and Connect has helped me to see that, no, these students do need to work past their obstacles that they have and become motivated, and they can if you hold them to it and really put in the extra effort with them. They give it back.

It took a little time for each of the teacher mentors to consider and answer the questions about the impact on their classroom. It was evident that this was not something they had consciously considered. Lindsey shared, "I'm sure it caused me to break things down differently for the kids. Not necessarily to lower my expectations, but to organize things in a way that kids could kind of grasp on and meet those small goals more easily."

Building on the success he had seen with having his mentees review their grades more often, Rob shared that for the other students in his class:

I print out more grade reports because I've seen some successes with this. It makes me more cognizant of when kids are not getting stuff done or falling through cracks, so to speak. I'd love to be able to do Check and Connect with all of the, but you can't so you do what you can.

One teacher mentor's experiences working closely with struggling students as her mentees not only helped her become more determined, but seemed to give her confidence

and strategies as well as and empowered her to increase her support for all the students in her classroom. Maggie described this when she said:

I'm not going to let missing assignments slide. I check in on my kids, not just for grades in my class, but, 'hey, let's take a peek at all of your grades. Okay, you have an A in this class, why do you not have an A in my class', or 'hey, what's going on here, you're doing so awesome in my class.' I think it just holds them accountable; it helps me be accountable as a teacher to make sure I really do need to get my kids to achieve, and to accomplish, and to be successful, because everybody in here can. It's just a matter of how much extra support they need to get there.

7. Mentoring is Hard Work

As summarized by Jucovy & Garrison (2000), "mentors in school-based programs may feel particularly discouraged if they believe they are not having an impact on their mentees' school performance, including grades and behavior" (p. 45). In listening carefully to the teacher mentors it was obvious that serving as a teacher mentor for at-risk middle school students is hard work. Along with the joy, pride, and reward of being a teacher mentor, the study participants also shared their frustrations and disappointments that come with the role. Rob shared, "when you have some successes you feel like, Oh, I want to keep going and I want to do more."

Three of the five teacher mentors emphasized the "burn out" factor. Rob was the most recent victim to this. He disclosed very frankly that during a recent year when he just wasn't reaching his mentees or seeing any positive change in them, it had a demotivating impact on him. He finished that year with his mentee but didn't feel at all successful with that student so the next year he wasn't a mentor.

The at-risk students being served by the teacher mentors are in various stages of their development (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013). Some do not have support from their family unit and have been making poor choices for many years (Gay, 2010). While the teacher mentors may see some significant change, the consistency with this change is tenuous at best. In hearing some of the stories from the study participants, it was apparent that the sharing of these close relationships with students hits the mentor especially hard when the mentee makes poor choices. As Lindsey shared:

I had one in particular who came to us as a repeat eighth grader. He was in our building in seventh grade and got expelled. He went to another school for eighth grade and didn't pass any of his classes. Then he came back to us for another year of eighth grade. In that time, he had also made some significantly poor life choices and was pretty open with me about it. I was surprised how open he was with me. He was making progress, though. He's the kind of kid that tended, by all appearances, to have a lot of emotional intelligence and just made bad choices. He was really bright, and I really felt like we were getting somewhere. He was trying to get to school and he was making his way. He ended up in an altercation with a staff member and getting expelled almost at the end of eighth grade again. I think his whole life really unraveled at that point, and it was a really rough situation. The staff member was in a tough spot, and the kid just reacted. It was disappointing, because I had done so much work with this kid. I done home visit after home visit and gotten homework together, and he was in my classroom all the time and stayed after a lot to work on things. We were really invested. It was just too bad.

The teacher mentors, however, all showed the commitment to on-going reflection and revision of their strategies for interventions to meet the needs of their mentees (Gay, 2010). Even after a year of feeling unsuccessful and a year off, Rob came back into mentoring again with a renewed sense of energy and commitment. When teachers are willing to take their part of the responsibility for finding the strategies and techniques that empower their students, through these, “each experience, positive or negative, a new gift can be discovered” (Brough Bermann, & Holt, 2013, Keep a Positive Outlook, para3).

8. Mentoring Challenges Collegial Relationships

On the drives home from the interviews, one of the things that struck me every time was the teacher mentor’s lack of judgment about his or her colleagues. From my role as coordinator of an initiative that places teachers as mentors with at-risk students, there is often a frustration with the teacher mentors who don’t follow through with meeting with their mentees once a week and/or don’t get their data submitted. All five study participants showed respect for the choices of their colleagues to not mentor a student. The teacher mentors were also accepting of those who were mentoring but weren’t doing as much for their mentees as they were. Serving as a teacher mentor in this school is purely voluntary. This collegial understanding and support emphasized that teachers are doing what can be done in the time they have. Perhaps this environment of collegial understanding and acceptance is one of the reasons this program continues to be implemented at this middle school. Jane summarized this accepting climate in the school:

I think just being more open. Not everybody is the same. Not everybody is going to have the same opinions that you have. There’s that respect piece of everybody is

different and just honoring it, not seeing that s a fault, but just honoring the difference that everybody brings.

In the *ABC's of School-based Mentoring*, Jucovy & Garrison (2008) describes a common problem with school-based mentoring programs when the “teacher or student complains that the student is missing, lunch, recess, or essential classwork to meet with the mentor” (p. 46). This was certainly consistent with the teacher mentors in this study as Lindsey described, “It was the biggest complaint. There wasn’t as much support as you would hope, but you understood.”

They study participants spoke of the tension with their colleagues when the time to meet with their mentees necessitated taking them out of class. In describing this, Lindsey said, “There was some tension there, because when a core teacher has prep time, that means kids are in gym, or in technology or computer. We were pulling them often from those settings, and that became very frustrating for those folks.”

All the teacher mentors understood the feelings of the classroom teacher being “guarded of their time” when the teacher mentor needed to pull a mentee from class in order to have time to meet with them. However, it was a unanimously shared frustration that with CC being a long-standing intervention in the building, that the other teachers didn’t seem to understand or support the teacher mentors. Describing how this felt, Rob said:

A lot of teachers are very good about it, but there are a few where it’s like I get mad at them because I write a pass to take my student out of their class and they don’t send them. And then I have go get them or I have to call and then they’re asking me questions like ‘Why?’ It makes me feel like they don’t value what I’m trying to do

with the students. I feel like saying, ‘listen, this is already a lot of work. You’re making it harder for me.

Another source of tension arose when a teacher mentor had a different perception of the capabilities of their mentee than another classroom teacher. Because of the depth of the relationship with their mentee, sometimes the teacher mentor can see potential in the student that classroom teachers may not see. The teacher mentor may want the student to step up to take more responsibility, take more risk, and this caused issues with the classroom teachers. In giving an example, Rachel explained:

My mentee came and showed me an assignment he had to do and asked for help. The sheet said you do this work for a C, this work for a B, and this work for an A. Well, he was looking at the B column. He said ‘I need help doing this’, and I said ‘okay’, and I asked ‘what about the A column, why don’t we do that?’ He said, ‘hmm, sure, yeah, let’s do that.’ Well, then he had gone back to his class and the teacher had got him back to doing the B column, and so I was very upset, in general, although I tried to understand.

Rachel took that to heart and went to have a conversation with the teacher to not only share her point of view, but to learn from the teacher. She shared:

I ended up going to this colleague and talking to her more about it, because I don’t give grades and I don’t know how you make this work, especially with an English as a Second Language student. So that was a conversation that was heated to some degree with just realizing what teachers are faced with when they’re trying to give grades. Since then, she’s been great about including me on he’s doing well, or hey, he’s not doing so great in this, can you...let him know. She’s kind of seeing me as

someone who's standing up for him and then she'll let me know that I could help any way I can.

One of the responsibilities of a teacher mentor is to serve as an advocate for the student (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). Maggie explained that:

Sometimes I feel like it can be challenging, because if they have a different view on the student than you do, sometimes those conversations about, 'okay, I understand she was misbehaving in your class today,' or 'I understand she is not your favorite', things like that. But to keep it positive is sometimes hard, especially when maybe they're seeing the more negative view on that student. And I feel like I kind of get like a motherly, 'hey, don't talk about her like that, or she's really trying.' But I also think that they see the effort that the student is putting in after school with me, and the effort that I'm putting in with them to help them be successful, and they are also more willing to do that with the kids, too.

But in all these examples, the teacher mentors also came away with something they learned, better understood, and/or a mutually shared responsibility to the progress of the student. Maggie also shared:

The conversations, even if it is a hard conversation, getting another teacher on the same page with you about that student is definitely a good conversation to have, because the bottom line is these kids need to be successful, and can be successful, so how are we going to get them there?

It was obvious as the teacher mentors talked about what they learn from other teachers about their mentees, that it was a highlight for them when they were able to share positive news with their mentees from other teachers and staff. As a strategy that she likes to

use, Maggie said, “I like specific feedback, so I can bring it back to them and say, ‘hey, your teacher says you’re doing really awesome here, but you could be a little less chatty’...So I do that.”

This school site uses a core team approach to teaching each grade level. The students they mentor are purposefully selected by or for them because they are also in their classes.

As Maggie described:

I feel like it’s so powerful to be the teacher and then to be the mentor also. You have the relationship with them inside the classroom and then you can extend it after school. You are just able to see their authentic interactions and get to know them as people first are able to mentor them on a different level as their teacher. You know about their personal life and can keep them on track for their future and their goals. I love it!

Three of the teacher mentors talked about the strength of the approach when other teachers on the core team are also mentoring students. One of them shared how even having two teachers within their team mentoring students provided as chance for them to connect around those students. Describing the difference, Jane said, “I think the most difficult time was when I didn’t have them as students. If you didn’t, those relationships were the hardest.”

The structure of having teacher mentors on the same grade level team seemed to have several advantages. Jane described how the process worked, “All four core teachers were on the same team and we all chose kids to work with within our team. Then, for instance, if they were having a problem in your class you shared that at our team meeting.” Lindsey elaborated on the benefits of working within their team, she said,

When we each had a few, that helped, because we all knew who the Check and Connect kids were, and so we would kind of back each other up in terms of if somebody was gone and their student needed something, we could step in. or if they were on a behavior chart, or setting goals for things, we could email another and support each other that way.

9. On-going Relationships with Parents Requires Strategy and Follow Through

One of the main components of the CC model is the communication and involvement of the parents and/or family (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). Because the engagement of family is a critical element of the success of a student, Nichols (2011) also calls on teachers to expand their role as servant leaders to the parents and families of their students. As students enter the middle school years, parents who have been dealing with a struggling student may become overwhelmed with the increased number of teachers and staff and may have trouble finding out from their child about school progress (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013). Often these parents have responded to numerous phone calls and meetings at the school about the things their child has done wrong. Positive communication directly from the school to the parent becomes even more important for middle school students who are struggling. Educators routinely “joke” about communication that goes home in students’ backpacks as going down a “black hole.” In many cases, without communication directly from the school to the parents, they may not know of the concerns until they receive a notice or call from the school that their child is failing (Brough et al., 2013). All the study participants echoed the importance of this connection with parents although not all of them felt this was one of their strengths.

The contact of the teacher mentors with their mentees' parents ranged from weekly to monthly. The majority of them contacted parents by phone, but as Maggie described:

I use email, phone definitely, sending things home in the mail... I try to go and sit in on my Check and Connect kids' conferences just to kind of hear what's happening from another perspective, and then to also give my feedback to parents of the kids as well.

In some cases they also saw the parents at school or in their homes.

Lindsey shared about the importance of positive communication with parents explaining, "calls home, and contact with the parents, need to be positive when possible to be truly meaningful." Each teacher mentor seemed to understand that parents or caregivers of their mentees might not have a positive feeling about the school. They provided examples including such things as parents that: had negative experiences themselves in school; didn't graduate; are new to the country and don't understand the systems here; and/or have endured years of contact from schools about negative issues with their child. Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2012) discuss the mentoring strategy as a strengths-based approach and encourage mentors to find positive things to share with parents on a regular basis.

While each teacher mentor interviewed agreed with the importance of parent contact, the longer a teacher had been a mentor seemed to have positive impact on their comfort level and commitment to contacting parents. Those who had mentored more students not only seemed more confident, but also they had a specific strategy for making regular contact with the parents. In sharing how her strategy had changed, Jane said:

It was important for me to connect with parents. So every Friday I called their moms and just filled them in on how their week was, what they had missing, how their

grades were, so I ended up getting to know their family on a first-name basis. It just made things easier because they knew that I was taking care of their child and their best interest. I felt that they had everything that they could have; everything that they could do to succeed was there for them for the taking if that's what they wanted. I didn't always do that. It was with this group that I had that are now seniors that I started and I would just tell the students it's not to get you into trouble; it's to make sure that your parents know that we're in this together. The reason why I'm calling is not to get you grounded because you're not doing things, but to make sure that your mom and dad are connected. So I treated it not as a punishment but it was a blessing that I had to stop and talk to your parents about things.

Descriptions about the process demonstrated the commitment to keep these communications positive as a key to the success of building a relationship with parents (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). In describing the importance of the parent relationship to her relationship with the student, Lindsey said, "Parent contact was a big part of the buy-in on behalf of the kid, because the kids realized that I wasn't calling home to necessarily talk about negative things, but just to catch up. I think that's important."

None of the study participants had experienced any concern from the students about the contact with their parents. In describing how positive it was, Rob said, "my other student is actually happy when I call. Any attention for that student is good attention, so if I'm talking to Mom and it's something that's positive, he's happy that I'm talking to mom."

One of the teacher mentors had a unique opportunity to build a strong relationship with the mom of one of her mentees. The mom came to the school for a parent program and the teacher mentor, Rachel, in describing the benefit of this said, "I'm able to let her know

what's going on and she's able to go ahead and tell him. I tell her he's welcome to stay after school and do homework, so we don't have to rely on him for communication." In this situation, it also helped that Rachel had met the family at a school event in the spring so they already knew her, which helped to solidify the relationship. Rachel further elaborated, "I can talk to her in Spanish because she doesn't speak English. I think that's helping."

As noted above, language can be a challenge when the parents speak Spanish and the teacher mentor does not. Frustrated with trying to make the parent communication happen with one mentee's parent who only speaks Spanish Maggie said, "parent communication has been hard getting ahold of the family. I've talked to a brother and we have something called a language line, but whenever I tried to get ahold of the mom, she's always working."

While the use of a language line telephone translation service is available, the use of an intermediary to share between parent and teacher mentor may limit the ability to build strong, caring relationships. Having a teacher mentor who speaks the language of the student and/or parents is obviously a major benefit, but within this school it is rare.

In addition to a possible language difference, another challenge the teacher mentors identified with contacting parents of at-risk youth is their mobility (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013). Lindsey described what was a common frustration with two of the teacher mentors, "I try to call and it's like the number's disconnected, or the mom doesn't call back."

As was clear from the interviews, the teacher mentors know and believe that parent communication is a core part of the mentor role and that it makes a difference for their mentee (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012). They were brutally honest, however, that it doesn't always happen. The same level of persistence witnessed in the dedication of the

teacher mentors to meeting with their mentee wasn't evident as they described communicating with parents. Rob explained one of the reasons from his point of view:

Parent contact is probably the part about the whole thing that I'm worst at because, it's just not as fun talking to the parents...I will call them if I have a good thing to share or something that I wanted to make sure that they knew about, but if I don't have an authentic reason to call them, I'm not going to do it, which makes me not as much a communicator as I probably should be.

Rachel had such a strong relationship with the mom of one of her mentees, but describing the communication with the parent of her second mentee she said, "I've only called and left messages. I let her mother know I'm here, if she has any questions, she can call, but I've never actually talked to her, so it's hard to know what she's thinking would be helpful."

The school does hold a parent breakfast each year where they invite the teacher mentors, mentees, and parents to attend. There has been a wide range of participation. As Rob shared, "Both of my kids came this year, but I think the turnout overall this year wasn't very good and I don't know why." Even when parents attend, it can be a challenge as Rob explained, "it's like oh, I need to have a conversation with you but I don't feel super comfortable and they're not super comfortable, but I think it's good to do it."

While the teacher mentors also work hard to be sure their mentees have the opportunity to participate in things like the breakfast, navigating communication with parents can sometimes be irritating. Sharing his attempt to make sure his mentee could attend one year, Rob said:

One of the students I had talked to the mom and planned on picking him up early in the morning. I went to his house, and I don't know if she was on some sort of drugs or what, but she was like 'who are you? Why are you here?' There's this white man in my driveway. "He's not coming with you. What are you talking about?" And I was like, I sent a permission slip. I had a conversation with you. That was a whole other story. So he didn't come, but the other student that I had that year did.

10. Monitoring Mentee's Data is a Framework for the Mentoring Process

Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2012) emphasize the importance of on-going monitoring of the mentee's data including attendance, behavior and grades as a key component of the CC model. It also includes maintaining a detailed record of when the mentor met with their mentee, what they covered, when they contacted the parents or other school staff with regard to their mentee, and case notes (Christensen et al., 2012, pp. 101-102). This data then is used in conjunction with what the mentors have learned about the life context of the student and determine appropriate interventions to meet his/her needs (Christensen et al., 2012). The mentors didn't seem especially frustrated with getting the data summary done, but the data is not as robust as what the CC manual suggests (Christensen et al., 2012, pp. 101-102).

Data monitoring at this middle school is done on a simplified compilation sheet where all the data is kept on one page. Rachel did share, "I'm pretty bad about totaling it up as I go along. I have to think back and look it up again after, because their grades can change daily." They submitted their monitoring sheet of data to the program coordinators once a month.

As Lindsey explained, “we would keep track of our meetings with the kids, their attendance and grades and I could kind of go through with the kids over time.” Rob shared that one thing they routinely do is, “I look at their grades. I will print a detailed report for all of their classes, not just mine, and I think that helps.” The access to grade and behavior data reports was on a building database not directly connected to the monitoring sheet. In sharing about the system, Rachel said, “I look at attendance, but with these two students that was never an issue...I look really at their grade and go through missing assignments.” Rob also added, “Eventually we’ll look at testing data once we get some new data.”

While this document could show trends in certain areas such as attendance, meeting consistency with their mentor and/or contact with parents (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), the teacher mentors in this study didn’t seem to use it in that way. They were not aware of any aggregate data shared with them regarding trends in the building or overall success with the program at the building level.

Of course, the lack of concern and the seeming ease with which they used their data document was compelling knowing the challenges my own district has faced with this issue. One concern with their system is that while easy to use, it doesn’t provide any knowledge about dosage of the mentoring intervention or what interventions are being used with the students served by the mentoring program as the CC program is designed to do (Christensen et al., 2012).

11. Mentors Appreciate Training and On-going Support

Knowing the importance of training mentors (Jucovy & Garrison, 2008), it was notable that these mentors had very little training especially with regard to the CC program (Christensen et al., 2012). What evolved from this topic was an emphasis in this middle

school on training and collaboration around culturally responsible teaching and diversity. With training time so limited in a school it is vital that whatever time is available needs to be focused on what will provide the most positive impact ultimately for the students who are served.

Christensen, Stout and Pohl (2012) indicate, “All mentors must be trained in the Check & Connect student engagement intervention” (p.11). The teacher mentors, who had been mentors for several years vaguely remembered some training early on, as Lindsey explained, “As I recall, initially, there were folks that came here from the University to give us an overview of the program, and different forms and things to fill out.” She indicated that from that point the program evolved mostly through monthly meetings, facilitated by the building coordinators, where all the mentors would meet together. Lindsey shared her perception of the benefit of this time, “It was really helpful for us to talk about what was working, what wasn’t working, so we could monitor and adjust our practices, and so we could, from year to year, make changes that were appropriate to the program.”

Even with those who received this initial training, none of these teacher mentors had any depth of knowledge about the foundational theories or research behind the model. While of interest to them, they didn’t seem to feel a need for this type of training. What they felt they needed in training on the CC model for mentors was a focus on the practical elements of mentoring including expectations, processes, documentation, and most importantly, intervention strategies.

All five teacher mentors did share that the building offers a regular time for mentors to come together. The building coordinators for CC offer a monthly early morning meeting time for mentors to come together to get up-dates and to share ideas with each other.

Although only 30 minutes, this time seemed to be important to the teacher mentors in this study. As Rob shared, “We just share ideas, and it’s good to say, ‘hey this worked for me.’ They give us lots of things like sentence starts and tools.” The two newer teacher mentors expressed their desire that these meetings might have more time for sharing and problem-solving around specific students and their needs.

The coordinators of this program have been consistent in their positions since initiating the mentoring program in their building. I have had the honor of working with these two women in the past and they are highly capable, dedicated, and passionate about the mentoring program in the building. Being in a local site that is only in the second year of implementation, one purpose for this study was for an opportunity to learn from those within a program that had been in existence for several years. The teacher mentors established that an important function of facilitating the program in the building was the consistency across the years of these monthly meetings (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012).

As part of learning from the process of this program in the building, it also seemed that perhaps the initial intensity of the sharing and monitoring of practices described by Lindsey wasn’t still there, or maybe wasn’t being translated to the newer teacher mentors in the building. With at least one of the newer mentees when asked if she knew about the research and purpose behind CC said, “No, I don’t. I guess I’m not sure of the main goal other than to be a mentor to the kids.” Interestingly, their lack of knowledge about the background and history of the CC model appeared to have no negative impact on their ability or motivation to be a teacher mentor. I wondered if that was because having the background of being a teacher provided a stronger foundation than either hiring full-time mentors without

a teaching background as some CC sites do (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) or using community volunteers as school-based mentors (DuBois & Karcher, 2014).

As the teacher mentors spoke about the building coordinators, it was obvious through tone of voice, their facial expressions, as well as verbal comments, that there is a strong and positive relationship between the coordinators and the teacher mentors. They all expressed that if they needed any assistance that they could go to the coordinators. However, they also shared that they don't have the time to spend to access this assistance with much frequency. When asked if she feels that she has someone to go to if she needs help, even as a new mentor, Maggie shared, "The coordinators have been great! Our Check and Connect team here, too, definitely. Anyone you ask, they have suggestions, tips, and tricks."

Reviewing what the teacher mentors shared and their capacity for understanding the needs of these at-risk students from a cultural context, it was difficult to determine how much of the expertise of these teacher mentors was due to natural learning process or formal training. I do believe that at the heart of this work is the servant leader disposition (Nichols, 2011) paired with the knowledge, skill and disposition for culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). This seemed to come together when the teacher mentors shared a compelling building-wide initiative that appeared to positively impact the teacher mentors' capacity to more successfully meet the needs of their at-risk students.

Several years ago, this middle school made a significant commitment to participation in training and action research with a focus on cultural responsive teaching (Gay, 2010) and understanding diversity. Describing how the demographics of this school had changed dramatically, Jane explained, "We used to be an all white school. It's very different now. Our students are very diverse." Through the school-wide initiative, teachers served on a team to

address the needs of this rapidly changing student body. As Jane explained, “We had to go to a lot of these different workshops, just looking at focusing on our diverse students. It just gets you thinking about equity in the classroom and those kinds of things. Especially as a white person, how do you make those connections?” Through this work as Lindsey shared, “we were working to implement strategies in our classroom to promote equity among our diverse student body.” In what was described as a “marriage” of this work and the mentoring program, Lindsey explained, “it was really, really interesting how it changed the dynamics of our classrooms.”

The weaving of the mentoring program with the culturally responsive teaching initiative appeared to result in a stronger impact as described by the teacher mentors. Within the strategies of cultural responsive teaching, teachers “provide spaces and relationships where ethnically diverse students feel recognized, respected, valued, seen, and heard” (Gay, 2010, p. 51), as well as “providing intellectually challenging and personally relevant learning experiences” (Gay, 2010, p. 52). Jane and Lindsey were the only two teacher mentors in this study that were teaching and mentoring in the building at that time. To gain a better understanding, when describing how this worked, Lindsey said:

Our goal was really to provide a lesson delivery in a way that would reach kids of color, whether it was materials, or the style, or making sure that we’re calling on those kids equally, promoting them as leaders in the classroom. We did some action research, and as part of that action research, again we kind of plunked these kids into Check and Connect who were really struggling, and we really saw some huge results, because again, our whole thinking was that if we can take kids who are already leaders, maybe not the right kind of leader, and show them how to be the right kind of

leader, they can do it. They're already doing it, they already have that skill, and so as part of Check and Connect, we kind of got those kids pulled in, and then that would promote that within the classroom. We saw huge gains in those kids in terms of their classroom participation, in terms of grades, homework completion, behavior for us, behavior for our subs, and honestly, that was probably our best couple of years in Check and Connect, when we were very intentional that way.

Even though this intensive training and action research process was not currently being implemented, the other three teacher mentors shared that they had been required to attend several cultural competency and/or equity trainings. Referring back to the literature to look more deeply at culturally responsive teaching, the importance of including this in training for mentors working with at-risk students was underscored by Gay (2010) when she surmised that without it, teachers could unintentionally create a situation where students feel they must compromise their own identity in order to succeed academically. The combining of the CC mentoring program with an emphasis on culturally responsive attitudes and actions, provided the impetus for the teacher mentors to see that "race, culture ethnicity, individuality, and intellectuality of students are not discrete attributes that can be neatly assigned to separate categories, some to be ignored while others are tended to. Instead, they are inseparably interrelated..." (Gay, 2010, p. 15). As Lindsey explained:

I think what was powerful was the partnering of the two, that we were not only doing equity training, because every teacher in our district and in our building has had substantial equity training, but when we had to go a little deeper as a team and do this action research piece, and we used Check and Connect as a component of that. We used Check and Connect to take kids who were at risk, but should have been doing a

lot better than they were, and to specifically target those kids in our Check and Connect program, that's what made the difference, was to pair the two.

All the study participants credited their training on working with diverse students with providing the impetus for a deeper reflection on both their unconscious attitudes and on their instruction. As Jane summarized, "Sometimes you can kind of pigeonhole different kids in certain ways, and then when you have this training it opens your eyes to what is real."

Advice to a New Mentor

At the end of the interviews, each teacher mentor was asked what advice he/she would give to someone new who was considering serving as a teacher mentor.

Christensen, Stout, and Pohl (2012) describe personal characteristics of an effective mentor in this program including: "believe that all students have the abilities to learn; believe that all students can make progress and change in their level of engagement at school; believe in the value of problem-solving; have the willingness to persist with students and cooperate with families and school staff; have advocacy, organizational and case management skills; are nonjudgmental toward others; are able to work independently and a willingness to be a mentor" (p. 12).

While the teacher mentors also shared the importance of some of the same characteristics, the uniqueness of being a mentor and a full-time teacher brought other up other considerations. Their responses also corresponded to most of the themes on which I have elaborated in the findings. I appreciated their candor and yet their sense of encouragement for potential new teacher mentors. Gleaning from their responses, the teacher mentors provided 10 suggested considerations for potential new mentors. These are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Advice to Potential Teacher Mentors from Experienced Teacher Mentors

Focus area	Advice from Teacher Mentors in this study
1. Time	“First thing is how much time do you have. It’s a big time commitment if you’re going to do it right.”
2. Limit the number of mentees you take	“I would say maybe just do one to start just to really give it the time...just one to start and then if it’s going well, add more.”
3. Be an experienced teacher first	“As a new teacher you are going to be overwhelmed. “ “Be in the classroom for a few years and kind of understand the background of the kids and have a good handle on the curriculum, because this is time-consuming.”
4. Be realistic	“Are you prepared to accept that you might not feel like you’re making a difference? You won’t automatically get the feeling that you’re saving the world.”
5. You have to want to do it	“Definitely do it if being a mentor to kids is something you care about.”
6. Don’t be afraid	“Don’t be afraid to put in the time. Don’t be afraid to give a piece of yourself to the kids and just be there for them, not just academics, but as a support system.”
7. Believe in them	“Hold high Expectations. Don’t back down on them just because they are your mentee student. Make sure that you realize that these students can be successful.”
8. Empower them	“Help kids build the skills that they need to succeed later in life. Don’t just be a crutch to them. Help them figure out the answers, but teach them ways that will carry on longer than you are their mentor.”
9. Be positive and be there	“No matter what, even though it’s frustrating or they’re not responding...Be available and be patient.”
10. Celebrate the small successes	“Even if one day you see a change, consider the little triumphs, those little things that just make the world go round. It can be chaotic for 10 minutes and then, all of a sudden, you look and they are working and you’re like, sweet!”

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

Given the pressures on school systems today to be accountable for all their students to succeed and the authentic desire to help the students in their buildings realize their potential, there is a desire to find evidence-based practices that provide additional opportunities for individualized attention to students who are struggling to be successful. Educators have learned a great deal about the power of relationships with students and the importance of a caring adult in their lives (Brough, Bermann, & Holt, 2013; Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). Putting that into practice among all the other things that must happen in a school is difficult at best.

School-based mentoring has surfaced as an intervention being used more frequently as an option to meet this critical need for students (Herrara, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000). Most school-based mentoring models center on having extra people, either volunteers or paid mentors, come in to the building to work with the students. With tight resources of money and time coupled with wanting the most educated and experienced people as mentors for their students, schools are turning to their teachers to help fill this role (Aylon, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of serving as a teacher mentor for at-risk middle school students. It was through this study that I hoped to understand the experiences of mentoring through the voices of these teachers. Through knowledge of what these teacher mentors have experienced, coordinators of school-based mentoring programs could be assisted in creating a comprehensive system that could both anticipate and address the needs of a mentoring program where teachers are the mentors. In

modifying the CC evidence-based model (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), there is a need to know not only the specifics of the model for fidelity purposes, but practical issues associated with using teacher as mentors. Recognizing that schools are using teachers in this role might also encourage mentoring researchers to conduct additional studies to help inform the process to not only identify best practices that result in quality outcomes for youth but also to consider the outcomes for the teacher mentors as well.

With this in mind, the grand tour question (Yin, 2010) for this study was, “What are the lived experiences of teachers mentoring at-risk middle school students?” Using the key components of the CC model (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012), categories of questions and sub-questions (Creswell, 2007) were created to get more specific about the grand tour question. However, with little guidance from studies in the literature about teachers serving as mentors, these questions were only a guide and were not intended to limit the findings.

The site selected for the study was a middle school located in the Midwest. The study participants interviewed were five teacher mentors who were teaching, or had taught, at the selected middle school. Interviews were one-to-one with a final focus group with all of the study participants. All study participants had experienced mentoring an at-risk middle school student for at least one year. Through a constant comparative analysis process (Creswell, 2007), I analyzed the transcripts of the multiple interviews and my field notes and identified 11 findings that describe the experiences of these teacher mentors. The findings included: relationships are foundational in the mentoring process, finding time to meet with the mentee is challenging but essential, mentoring requires doing more than the minimum, student progress provides motivation for the mentor, mentors find mentoring personally rewarding and enlightening, learning from mentoring at-risk students transfers into the mentor teachers’

classroom, mentoring is hard work, mentoring challenges collegial relationships, on-going relationships with parents require strategy and follow through, monitoring mentee's data is a framework for the mentoring process, mentors appreciate training and on-going support.

While qualitative research is limited in generalizability (Creswell, 2007), to allow readers of this study to make decisions regarding transferability to other settings, thick descriptions (Creswell, 2007) were provided directly from the teacher mentors' stories and shared experiences. While some of their experiences align with the research on school-based mentoring (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Rhodes, 2005) the position as both a teacher and a mentor created a unique distinction to the role (Aylon, 2011).

The passion and dedication of the study participants and their apparent dispositions aligned with the concept of teachers of servant leaders (Bowman, 2005). In my former role as a national outreach coordinator and trainer, I often returned from training trips exhausted but full of hope because of the caliber of people throughout the country working diligently to meet the needs of our struggling youth. This study provided an opportunity to dig deeper into the servant leader disposition of these teacher mentors and to have the rare opportunity to expand my understanding by hearing directly from those who are doing, or have done, this work in an everyday environment.

The energy from starting the interview process was propelled by the stories and the chance for the teacher mentors to tell their story. One of the most rewarding parts of the entire journey for me was the reaction of the five study participants during the final focus group. One participant shared, "It was an honor to be part of this." And another received universal agreement from the group when she summarized, "Thanks for noticing the work we've done. It was really nice to have that recognition."

These comments appear to represent the power of qualitative research to provide a voice (Creswell, 2007) for those who have not been asked previously to share and to provide the acknowledgement of the hard work, dedication and compassion of these teacher mentors in a forum beyond their own building.

Conclusions

In my current work with a CC program (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012) in the second year of implementation with over 70 teachers serving as mentors in three middle schools and three high schools in the local district, there has been a tremendous pressure to expect immediate implementation and accountability for success. Driving this expectation is the realization that the students being served are at such a critical time in their lives. I had hoped that with knowledge of both the research and learning from the experience of others, we might be able to navigate around some of the typical learning through mistakes that often happens with a new initiative. From talking with these teacher mentors, it is clear that there is an on-going evolutionary process and flow with a school-based mentoring initiative unique to each site. The components of the CC model (Christensen et al., 2012) can be used as the road map, the lessons from the research on quality school-based mentoring (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; Rhodes, 2005) can help provide the guidance, but ultimately each site must experience with trial and error to find what will work in a given site and how to secure the program as a systemic part of a student engagement intervention process. With each year, the students, their families, their life and school contexts, funding, and the teachers who mentor will change the dynamic of what is needed (Gay, 2010), the successes that will happen and the challenges that will appear. The teacher mentors in this study provided a unique lens into what coordinators need to keep in mind to help teacher

mentors feel empowered, appreciated, and successful. The teacher mentors in the study also helped identify potential barriers, for example, the attitude of other staff in the building that can get in the way of not only the success of teacher mentors but also their motivation to persist.

The struggle to find time for quality and quantity of professional development is ongoing for schools. It is difficult to find time to bring together the teacher mentors within a building at one time, let alone from multiple buildings due to time constraints and other priorities for professional development days. Even if teachers were willing to spend the time, without the funding to pay for the extra teacher time or substitutes, it just isn't possible to have any type of formal training. One major strategy resonating clearly from the teacher mentors in this study was the need to reprioritize the precious training time we do have to focus on best practice strategies to meet the needs of their diverse students (Gay, 2010). Another vehicle will need to be found for assisting them with the logistical parts of our school-based mentoring program, like scheduling and forms. In districts that do not focus on or provide culturally responsive teaching or equity training, this is a gap that needs to be filled. The teacher mentors in this study clearly identified the pairing of mentoring with culturally responsive teaching strategies as a powerful combination. This combination appeared to not only increase the confidence and ability of the teacher mentors to meet the needs of their mentees, but seemed to transfer into their classroom strategies as well.

Through the voices of the teacher mentors in this study, my perseverance to maintain and expand the CC initiative in our district has been reinvigorated. Needed to help me tell the story convincingly are more efficient tools and strategies to gather and share the stories from the teacher mentors rather than relying only on quantitative data. As anticipated when

selecting a qualitative study, hearing the stories directly from the voices of these teacher mentors was compelling. It is important that even in the midst of budget cuts, changing administrative focus, and new ventures, that schools continue to do what can be done with the time and financial resources available to continue the CC initiative they have started. Meeting with the teacher mentors in this study and reviewing the data completely provided new insight and knowledge to assist in changes that need to be made to strengthen the use of teachers as mentors in the school where I work. My hope is that this study will help others in similar situations. The changes that are needed include reformatting training to include cultural responsive knowledge and techniques; providing a more structured support system for teacher mentors within a building; creating more opportunities either in person or via electronic methods to allow the teacher mentors to share and problem-solve with each other; evaluating the extent of data that needs to be collected in order to streamline the time data collection takes our teacher mentors; investigating new ways of providing administrative recognition and support for CC; providing a more comprehensive understanding in the faculty and staff of the importance of the mentoring teachers are doing; and finally to identify further ways to provide on-going acknowledgement and recognition of those giving their time to mentor our struggling students.

This study has also reaffirmed the potential of the mentoring model to positively affect the lives of students. In the course of the interviews, Rachel commented, “start planting the seed so that even if they don’t show you that they’re going to listen, they might.” Much like a farmer must prepare the soil, plant the seeds, nurture and care for them, and wait to see what the harvest may be, these teacher mentors do the same. Some will have the chance to see the impact of their efforts; for others they must have faith that they’ve done

their best and perhaps down the road because of the relationship and caring from their teacher mentor the student will realize a greater success in some aspect of their life.

It is in the beliefs the teacher mentors have in the process of mentoring while accepting they may never see the results that I feel the true essence of their experiences as teacher mentors was revealed. It exists in the synthesis of their time, dedication, frustrations, small successes, reciprocal relationships, reaching out to truly understand the life context of their mentees, unconditional caring, perseverance and willingness to trust in the process, their mentee, and themselves. This synthesis is underscored by the unending faith of the teacher mentors in the power of human relationships and their enduring belief that as a teacher mentor, one person can potentially make a difference in the life and future of one child.

Recommendations

While school-based mentoring is expanding in the research, the bulk of the research focuses on processes and outcomes from the lens of overall programmatic structure, processes, and mentoring emphasis (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Eby, Allen, Hoffman, Baranik, Sauer, Baldwin, Morrison, Kinkade, Maher, Curtis, & Evans, 2013; Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Rhodes, Spence, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006) There is a growing body of research focused on the impact of mentoring on youth (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; Keller & Pryce, 2012; Rhodes, 2005). Rhodes and Lowe (2008) summarize, “Much remains to be done to understand the complexities of mentor relationships and to determine the circumstances under which mentoring programs make a difference in the lives of youth” (p. 14). Additional research is needed to understand the complexities of these relationships with

an emphasis on the short- and long-term benefits to adult mentors and their on-going relationships with youth during the course of their careers.

Little is known about the impact of mentoring on those who mentor. This is especially the case when a teacher takes on the role of mentor on top of their other responsibilities (Aylon, 2011). While this study provides only a small glimpse into the experiences of five teacher mentors for at-risk middle school students, it does open up additional questions especially regarding using teacher as mentors.

Research is needed focusing on the role of teachers as mentors. Documentation is needed on the best practices when using teachers as mentors with at-risk students including the impact of the experiences on the teachers themselves. In addition, with the knowledge of the importance of teacher and student relationships (Dubois & Karcher, 2014), this model of mentoring needs to be explored in greater depth to determine the impact on student achievement and engagement. Discovered in this study is the potential for multiple benefits from teachers serving as mentors. From the study participants, it appears that the depth of understanding about students who are struggling seems to carry over into a change in the teacher's attitude and strategies for his or her classroom climate and instructional strategies for all of their students.

While the outcome for individual students is the impetus for initiating any mentoring program, further research is needed to determine to what extent the process of using a teacher in an instrumental mentoring relationship with an at-risk student positively impacts: how teachers attend to and engage at-risk students in their current and subsequent classrooms; how they relate to and advocate for needs of at-risk students with their colleagues; and

whether the experience fulfills a sense of reward of profession which many educators share as the reason they went into teaching as a career.

In the middle school in this study, the mentoring program was woven together with culturally responsive teaching strategies and techniques. This combination appears to have strength in both concept and implementation. Further research is needed to determine the most beneficial type of training, structure for implementation, and strategies used along with proven outcomes for both teacher mentors and their students. Further research is also needed to determine if mentoring could serve an effective professional development opportunity for teachers to learn, with more intellectual and affective depth, about the needs of their culturally diverse students. If so, it then might possibly positively influence their future interactions in the classroom which then scales up the potential positive impact on students throughout the careers of the teachers.

While numerous researchers and program developers have listed recommended characteristics of mentors for school-based programs (Christensen, Stout, & Pohl, 2012; Jucovy & Garrison, 2000), further research is needed to determine the characteristics and/or dispositions of teachers who are successful in mentoring at-risk students. Bowman (2005) describes the teacher as a servant leader as someone who is “listening to the hopes of others so that one can lead by being led” (p. 259). While the teacher mentors interviewed for this the study all demonstrated the disposition of servant leaders, it is not known if that was what led them to be mentors in the first place, or if the characteristics of a servant leader became unveiled and/or more ingrained in their disposition after serving as a mentor. While authors such as Nichols (2011) and Bowman (2005) have set forth the concept of teachers as servant leaders, it would be interesting to study to what extent the cultural responsive training

impacted the dispositions of the participants in my study that reflect a servant leader. Further research into the nature and development of these dispositions would also inform the field as it relates to the selection and training of teachers as mentors.

In this study, Clifton StrengthsFinder (CSF) 2.0® (Rath & Conchie, 2008) provided a cursory look at the strengths and domains for the five teacher mentors. While Rath and Conchie (2008) have completed extensive research on the application of these strengths and domains in leadership and teams, additional research could explore the strengths from the perspective of mentors.

Four of the teacher mentors in this study were parents. Originally I hadn't even considered asking about this, but it came up in comments from several of the mentors. Rob explained, "I think the best training for me was being a parent. When you're a parent, you see it from your kid's perspective, and you learn what questions to ask." Further research could investigate whether being a parent is a prominent characteristic in mentors and whether or not that influences their sense of confidence and/or success.

Additional research into identifying and meeting the needs and desired outcomes for mentors could inform what types of training are most effective, identify the most critical components to cover, and potentially influence future mentors in their decision to participate or sustain their involvement. This research might also determine for schools using existing teachers serving as mentors, if there are components that can be omitted from training relying on their education and teacher preparation training instead.

As a former trainer on the CC model, there was an expectation that everyone who was trained know about the background, history, and research on the model. While that would be the most desirable, with such limited time available for training and on-going professional

development, perhaps teachers can serve as mentors successfully in a program structure without having to know all the intricacies of how the program was developed. In this study, the teacher mentors trusted their coordinators to do due diligence to identify and implement a proven model and to provide them with an accountable structure. What the teacher mentors identified as most critical to their role, was to know: the day-to-day expectations; the overall goals of their interaction with the student; strategies for identifying need and interventions; strategies for working with culturally diverse students; and that they had support for problem-solving as needed. Further research into what background in any mentoring model implemented impacts the ultimate outcomes would be helpful to coordinators and trainers working to provide the most concise and yet comprehensive training for their mentors.

While this study did not consider student outcomes related to the participant teacher mentors, there is a continued need to research the characteristics of mentors in correlation to the outcomes for the students they mentor.

In conclusion, through this study, I was once again filled with hope for our struggling students because of the dedication demonstrated by these five teacher mentors. The following statement by Brough, Bermann & Holt (2013) fits not only my beliefs, but serves as call to this work for teachers to serve as mentors for our at-risk children, “The teachers who accept the challenge will move forward to probe, to create, to stimulate, to challenge, to provoke, to think, and to care” (Chap. 5, para. 4). For without teachers who take on this challenge, our children cannot meet their potential.

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Appendix A

Email Introduction for Potential Participants

Greetings Check & Connect Mentors,

date:

For my doctoral dissertation from Drake University, I am conducting a research study to gain a better understanding of the *experiences of teachers serving as mentors for at-risk middle school students*. You are invited to participate based on your experience as a Check & Connect© mentor for at least one at-risk middle school student in your building during at least one school year. For the study I need to have 5-7 teacher mentors from your building and hope to have a diversity of men and women as well as a range of experience in years as a teacher.

To participate in the study, your involvement in the study will include the following:

- Review and sign the attached Informed Consent Form
- Once the Informed Consent Form is received you will be sent via email a short on-line survey about basic demographics and basic information about your experience as a mentor
- Following the analysis of the surveys, final participants will be selected and notified regarding participation in the interview process
- Three short interviews will be conducted over 4-6 weeks in a location and time selected by you to make it as convenient as possible. The interviews will be conducted during out-of-school time and you will receive one \$10 gift card for each interview in appreciation for your participation.
- The anticipated time and focus for each interview includes:
 - Interview 1 (15-20 minutes)—A chance to introduce myself and learn about you
 - Interview 2 (45-60 minutes)—Specifics about your experience as a mentor for a student
 - Interview 3-(20-30 minutes)—An opportunity to provide feedback on my draft analysis, share anything additional you wish to clarify or add, and a discussion regarding confidentiality

Please note: your involvement in the study will be kept confidential and you will be represented only by a pseudonym in all documentation. Additional conversations will be held during the study to address any additional changes that need to be made to assure the level of confidentiality with which you are most comfortable. The building administrators and Check & Connect© Coordinators will only receive the final copy of the study report by request.

Through the survey, I am interested in learning basic demographic information about you as a teacher and mentor in your building as well as some basic information about your experience as a mentor. This survey has 15 questions that will take you about 10 minutes to complete. Some questions are multiple choice and have a range of options, while others allow written responses.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may elect not to participate or leave the study at any time. If you leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer on the survey as well as during the interview process

If you have questions or want the research study results, please contact kay.augustine@drake.edu or 952-500-3468 at any time. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Sally Beisser at sally.beisser@drake.edu or 515-271-4850 at any time with questions or concerns.

In addition, information and documentation regarding this research study has been filed with the Drake University Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact the Drake University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (515) 271-3472 or by e-mail at irb@drake.edu

Thank you,
Kay A. Augustine, Ed.S.
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education- Drake University-Des Moines, IA

Appendix B**Invitation Flyer**

**You've been a Check & Connect Mentor!
Would you please share your experience?**



**Research Study on the
“Experiences of Teachers as Check & Connect
Mentors”**

Doctoral Dissertation of Kay Augustine
Drake University

One quick survey
Three short interviews
A \$10 gift card for each interview
Participation & Responses kept Confidential

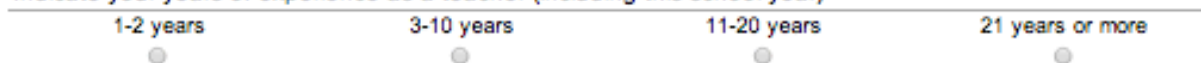
Email Kay.Augustine@drake.edu or call 952-500-3468

Appendix C

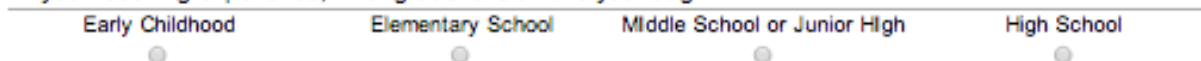
Survey was available via Qualtrics

Your experience as a teacher

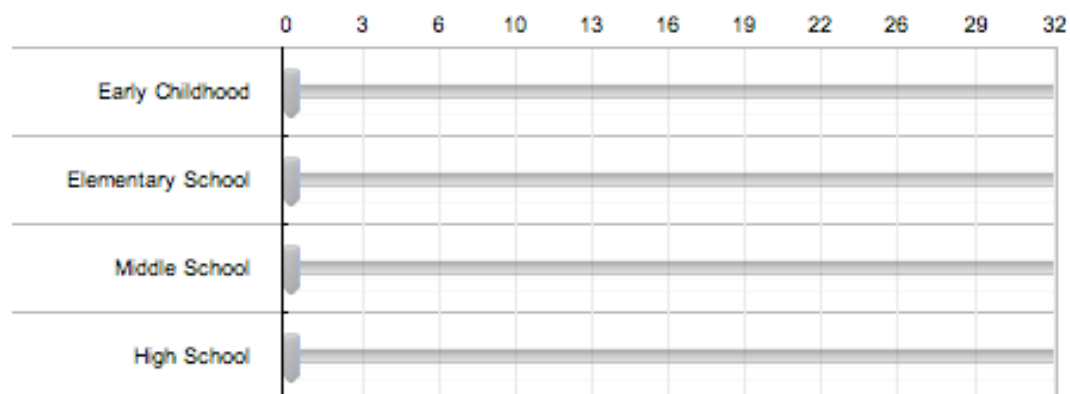
Indicate your years of experience as a teacher (including this school year)



In your teaching experience, what grade levels have you taught?



How many years of teaching have you done at each level? (Grab the bar with your mouse and slide to the right)



Summary Information

This section contains questions regarding basic demographic information. You may choose not to answer any question.

Indicate your age range

20-30 years of age 31-40 years of age 41-50 years of age 51-60 years of age 61 years of age or older

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Sex of respondent

Male



Female



Ethnicity of respondent

Caucasian or White Hispanic or Latino Asian American Indian or Native Alaskan Black or African American Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Race/Ethnicity Mixed Prefer not to answer

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Thank you for your time and participation in this survey to better understand the experiences of teachers as mentors for at-risk middle school students.

With appreciation,
Kay A. Augustine, Ed.S.
Doctoral Candidate
Drake University

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

For each of the three interviews, each respondent will select the location that may include: the school, a library or other location where he or she will feel comfortable and the environment will allow for recording the conversation.

Grand Tour Question

What are the lived experiences of teachers mentoring at-risk middle school students?

Interview #1—approximately 15 minutes

- Introduce myself
- Explain purpose of
- Ask permission to audio record
- Confidentiality
 - Review the specifics of the consent document
- Ask the participant to select a pseudonym for himself/herself and for their mentee(s)

Questions

Describe what you do as a mentor for your student(s).

Possible follow up questions

- a. What do you do when you are together?
 - b. What types of things do you do on behalf of your student when you are not together?
- Ask the participant to select a pseudonym for himself/herself and for their mentee(s)
 - Thank the participant and provide them with \$10 gift card
 - Set the time and place for the next interview

Interview #2—approximately 45 minutes

- Welcome participant, reiterate purpose of the study including the confidentiality agreement, remind him/her of the selected pseudonyms and that I will be recording the interview and taking notes
- Briefly summarize the content from the first interview

Questions

6. Mentoring Experiences

7. Tell me about a time when something went particularly well with your mentee.

8. Tell me about a specific time when you were challenged in mentoring your student.

9. Describe how being a mentor changed your perceptions about struggling students.

10. Describe how being a mentor has impacted your classroom.

11. Connecting with Parents

Explain how you connect with the parents of your mentee.

12. Collegial Support

- Tell me about the type of training and on-going support you've received, or would have liked to receive, from administrators and program Coordinators

- Explain how being a mentor has impacted your relationships with your colleagues.

13. Summary

Describe what advice you would provide to a teacher who has just agreed to be a mentor.

- Thank the participant and provide them with \$10 gift card
- Explain that the draft analysis will be sent via email for their review, next interview will be used to share any clarifications or pertinent omissions
- Set the time and place for the next interview

Interview #3—approximately 30-45 minutes

- Welcome participant
- Reiterate purpose of the study including the confidentiality agreement
- Remind him/her of the selected pseudonyms
- Summarize the purpose of this interview is to clarify anything in the draft analysis and an opportunity to add anything they feel is pertinent
- Discuss the participant's comfort level with the their description or use of quotations and if they wish to have anything changed or removed to protect their confidentiality

Questions

Do you have anything you wish to clarify or feel it is important to address?

Do you have anything you wish to have changed or removed to protect your confidentiality?

- Thank the participant and provide them with a \$10 gift card

- Ask the participant if they would like to receive an electronic copy of the final dissertation.

Appendix E

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Teacher Mentors: Lived Experiences Mentoring At-risk Middle School

Students **Investigator:** Kay A. Augustine, Doctoral Candidate at Drake University

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of teacher mentors for middle school students who are at risk of not completing or graduating from middle school. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have served as a mentor for at least one at-risk middle school student for a minimum of one school year.

If you agree to be part of the study, you will be asked to participate in a series of three in-person interviews focused on your experiences. The interviews will take place outside of the regular school day so no classroom teaching time will be impacted. You will be asked to select the location for the interview to ensure you are in a comfortable environment for sharing. Interview questions will be focused on your experiences as a teacher mentor for a middle school student who meets your building criteria for referral to Check & Connect. The first interview will be approximately 15-20 minutes, the second one will take approximately 45-60 minutes and the third interview will take 20-30 minutes. The three interviews will take place over a period of four to six weeks.

RISKS

Your participation will be kept confidential from others including your school building administration, school-based mentoring coordinators, and other teacher mentors. You will select and be referred to only by a pseudonym. Pseudonyms will also be used for mentee names, buildings, communities or states involved in the study during data collection and the final dissertation. The final dissertation document will only be provided to your building administration and counselors upon request. No in-progress transcripts or in-progress analysis will be shared beyond those interviewed and only for the purpose of a member check to assure me that I have represented your comments accurately. Additional conversations will take place regarding any changes or eliminations of descriptions or quotations to maintain your desired confidentiality.

While participating in this study, you may experience the following risks:

- Others in the building may recognize which teacher mentor is being described through direct quotations or specific stories about mentees used in the final descriptive document
- Possible feeling of emotions such as sadness and/or frustration

BENEFITS

There is no direct benefit to you implied in the participation with this study. This study will provide information about the experiences of teacher mentors with at-risk

middle students that can inform planning, training, and implementation of future teacher mentors in school-based mentoring programs.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

Participating in this study, you will not incur any costs. I will compensate you with a \$10 gift card for each interview. If you decide to not continue your participation in the study, you will keep your gift cards for each interview, or part of the interview that has been completed.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

As a participant in this study, you have the right to not answer any question or withdraw at anytime from the study, for any reason, and the data from your interviews will be returned to you upon request. You will receive a copy of the draft analysis section of the dissertation and have the opportunity during the third interview to provide feedback and suggest any changes or elimination of descriptions or quotations to maintain your desired level of confidentiality.

All records identifying study participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing department of Drake University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy these records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken:

- Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, then stored on a password protected computer
- Data will be coded by creating categories according to emerging themes
- Data will be stored for three years after the completion of the dissertation and will then be destroyed
- Raw data will be accessible to the researcher only, and dissertation committee members only after a pseudonym is chosen by you (the participant)
- If the results are published or shared, your identity will be kept confidential

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study

- To ask questions or for further information about this study you may contact:
 1. Researcher, Kay A. Augustine, at 952-500-3468 or kayaugustine@gmail.com
 2. Researcher's supervising faculty member, Dr. Sally Beisser, at 515-271-4850 or sally.beisser@drake.edu

- IF you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, 515-271-3472, IRB@drake.edu, Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa 50311

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you understand that participation in this study is voluntarily and you agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Respondent (please print) _____

Signature Date

I (do/do not) grant permission to be directly quoted in the dissertation paper

Respondent signature

Researcher's signature

_____ Date _____